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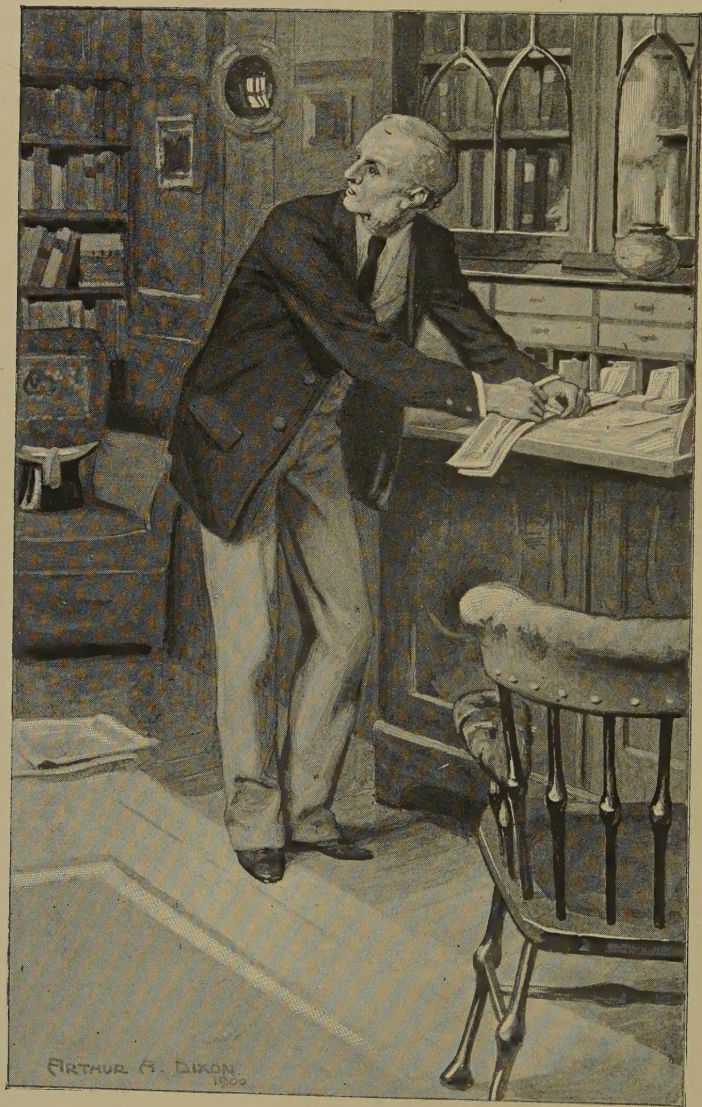
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"GOOD HEAVENS! WAS THAT A STEP?"

Frontispiece.

See p. 57.

TO PAY THE PRICE

BY

SILAS K. HOCKING

AUTHOR OF "GOD'S OUTCAST," "THE DAY OF RECOMPENSE,"
"THE STRANGE ADVENTURES OF ISRAEL PENDRAY," ETC., ETC.

WITH ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

ARTHUR A. DIXON

LONDON

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TO PAY THE PRICE.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE EDGE OF THE STORM.

It was morning and summer time ; the air was cool, and fragrant of the woods and fields. In the blue dome of heaven a few white clouds floated slowly past, and on the earth the dew-drops were sparkling everywhere like points of fire. Robert Morton came bareheaded into his garden, and, walking up to a large pear tree, leaned his shoulder against it, and looked away across the valley to the distant range of hills.

It was a morning to touch the heart with hope and gladness ; to cheer the disconsolate and give courage to the despairing. Yet it brought neither courage nor cheer to Robert Morton. He stood in the sunshine without feeling it. Looked off upon the landscape without seeing it. Drank in the sweet breath of the morning and knew not that it was fragrant with the breath of uncounted and ungathered flowers.

He was a sad-faced man with a high forehead and diminutive chin. A silent man, on the whole, for

his thoughts kept him so busy that he had little time to talk, and less inclination. He had never been an optimist, and with increase of years life's outlook seemed to get greyer and more depressing.

But the outlook never seemed so dark as at present. The morning's post had brought him an urgent and peremptory demand for money. Such demands had become common of late. He was in debt to a dozen people, and they had become pressing and clamorous. In the village his credit was still good, and none of his acquaintances had any suspicion that he was in pecuniary straits. But the secret was bound to come out soon, and then what would become of him and his family? One mitigating circumstance there certainly was. He had not spent the money on himself. It was not in consequence of any personal extravagance that he had got into debt, he had been careful even to penuriousness. He had denied himself to give his nephew Henry the benefits of a good education, and this was the result.

Perhaps he had not been absolutely disinterested in the matter. As a matter of fact he would not have compromised himself in such a manner, and got himself into such financial straits, had it not been for the urgency of Lord Menheniot. The Earl, who was childless himself, had taken a fancy to Harry. Not only his handsome presence, but his mental aptitude, had won him favour in the nobleman's eyes.

"I say, Morton," he had said more than once, "you must let that young man read for the Bar, you really must. He'll become a Q.C. in time if you

give him a chance, and, what is more, I'll see to it that you are not out of pocket in the end."

So, partly to please the Earl and partly in the hope that his own fortune would be advanced thereby, he had allowed Harry to read for the Bar, and had made himself responsible for all the costs.

He was regretting it now. Lord Menheniot had said nothing lately about meeting Harry's expenses, and he had not got to the end of them yet. When Harry had passed his final, which he hoped to do in October, what then? Barristers did not get briefs in a moment. They could not go out and tout for them as a shopkeeper did for orders; and indeed, unless a man had influential friends, he might wait until the moss grew on his eyebrows and all the blood dried up in his veins.

"I ought to have foreseen all this," Robert Morton said to himself, bitterly, as he looked with unseeing eyes across the smiling landscape. "Lord Menheniot is like the rest of the world; he makes promises one minute and forgets them the next."

A step on the gravel behind him caused him to look round, and he saw Harry advancing towards him.

"So you are getting your morning's sun-bath, eh, father," the young man said, with a genial smile.

"Nay, I'm getting a breath of fresh air, that's all."

"It's what I've come out for myself, I've been working since four," and he stretched himself and yawned.

"I hope you'll get some good out of all your toil," the elder man said, gloomily, "though I very much

doubt it. The toilers get all the kicks in this world; the idlers grab the pence."

"Not all of it, Dad. In the professions it is generally the hardest workers who get the plums."

"Not generally, my boy. You are young yet, and look hopefully at the world. I have toiled hard enough all my life, God knows, and here am I not only in poverty but in debt."

"That's partly my fault," and the young man's face clouded, "but I hope some day, Dad, I shall be able to repay you, and with compound interest."

"While waiting for the grass to grow, the horse starves," Robert Morton answered, moodily, "and in the meantime Lord Menheniot appears inclined to do nothing."

"He told me once that when I had pulled off all the exams he would pay the piper, but I would rather he didn't."

"Rather he didn't?"

"Yes, I don't like to feel that I am dependent on a stranger."

"That's all nonsense, Harry. I should never have incurred all the expense on your account but for what the Earl said, and now he seems inclined to back out of his promise and leave me in the mud."

"We've always found him a man of his word," Harry said, "and then, you see, he is not particularly rich. His father was made a peer for political services, but I don't think he left much money."

"He's all Graystone, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and if he owned the entire county I should still wish not to be dependent on him. If he does anything I shall look upon it merely as a loan."

"You are much too squeamish, my boy," said the older man. "I've done the work of steward for him for the last ten years, and he's paid me but a beggarly salary for it, as you know."

"And yet, when he offered you the post, I've heard you say you felt as though your fortune was made."

"That is true, but a drowning man will grasp at any straw, and a schoolmaster's salary in Graystone is starvation when there's a family to be brought up."

"Oh, well," said Harry, with a smile. "Let's not always look at the dark side of things; circumstances will mend after a while if we are only patient."

"I don't want to discourage you," said the older man, "but unless Lord Menheniot keeps his promise soon, both you and I will find ourselves in queer street." And he turned on his heel and walked back into the house.

Harry watched him with a feeling almost of remorse in his heart. He felt as though he had been the weight that had caused the stoop in his shoulders and crushed the sunshine out of his life.

"Poor old father," he said to himself, "the fates have always been against him. He has tried hard enough, Heaven knows; but I think his persistent pessimism has hindered him all the way. Perhaps the clouds will lift later on," and he smiled and raised his face to the sunshine.

It was impossible for a young man of abounding health and vigour to be pessimistic on such a morning. The air itself was almost as intoxicating as champagne. The sky was all asparkle with light, and in the neighbouring plantation that encircled

Graystone Park the birds were singing fit to split their throats.

Looking away between the trees in the direction of the Hall, he fancied he caught the gleam of a white dress, and for a moment the colour mounted to his cheeks, and his heart throbbed perceptibly faster.

"I wonder if I shall have a chance of seeing her to-day," he muttered to himself. "Oh, I hope I shall. I know I'm a fool, and that the reckoning day is sure to come. But what's the odds? The dream is sweet while it lasts."

He was still looking away through the trees and smiling, when a sweet, musical voice called from the doorway—

"Breakfast is ready, Harry."

"And I'm ready for it, Madge," he answered, as he strode towards her.

"I went to look for you in your room," she said, smiling at him, "but found that the bird had flown."

"Didn't father tell you I was in the garden?"

"I did not ask him."

"And have you cooked the breakfast as usual?"

"Dora and I between us. Mother has one of her bad headaches again this morning."

"You are a good girl, Madge," and he stooped and kissed her sweet lips, and then they passed together into the house.

He did not know that Madge was not his sister, neither was she aware of the fact. For some reason, best known to themselves, Robert Morton and his wife had kept from Harry the secret of his parentage, and there was no one else to enlighten him. He

had lived with them since he was a year old, had always called them father and mother, and no one could say that they had not done their duty by him.

It is true that Robert Morton received a hundred pounds when he adopted the child as well as all the furniture belonging to his dead sister. The furniture he kept, for he had not long been married himself, but the money he invested, and it went the way that so many investments go. A few months later he got an appointment as master of a village school in Yorkshire. Two years later he removed to a village in Norfolk. A year later he moved again, and this time to London; but he quickly tired of the great city and sought the country once more. When Henry was ten years of age the parochial school of Graystone, in Hertfordshire, fell vacant, and Robert Morton applied for the post and got it.

The salary was only small, but it was the best he had yet received, and he tried to be grateful and content. Two years later Lord Menheniot offered him the post of steward in addition, and then he felt as though his fortune was made. Fifty pounds a year in addition to what he had been receiving seemed positive wealth, and since the duties attached to the office were exceedingly light, for the Graystone estate was only a small one, he felt grateful, and for a year or two looked at the world through rose-coloured spectacles, and fancied that life was not such a bad thing after all. But expenses have an unpleasant way of increasing without your knowing how. Robert Morton spent no more upon himself than formerly, while his wife was always of an

economical turn. But the girls, as they grew older, wanted more clothes and better. Then Bob was born (they christened him Robert, after his father, but called him Bob by way of distinction), and Bob proved to be a most unlucky baby. He took everything in the shape of disease that came along. He had such a liking for measles that he took them three times. He began to wrestle with whooping cough when he was only three months old. How he conquered was a puzzle to everybody. Bronchitis became quite a familiar friend of his. Mumps and nettle-rash he took very little notice of. He smiled cheerfully through a severe attack of scarlatina, but diphtheria nearly killed him ; indeed, the doctor gave no hope at all, but Bob was not to be beaten. He came out of the ordeal but a wreck of his former self, but cheerful and good-tempered withal.

When he had exhausted all the diseases common to childhood he began making sundry experiments with his constitution on his own account. He got blood-poisoning through driving a rusty nail into his foot ; suffered from congestion of the brain through falling over stairs ; got his arm broken in getting under a cart wheel, and came near drowning so often that he got quite used to it.

If there was ringworm within a mile of Graystone he got it, warts flourished so abundantly on his hands that he could have supplied the county and then had a few to spare. And for a short space he suffered from St. Vitus's dance, much to his own amusement. Yet he grew and flourished in spite of everything. Whatever might be the condition of his body he always carried a cheerful spirit. But he

wore out his mother with anxiety, and broke down her health with constant nursing. So that when he was out of the doctor's hands, she almost invariably took his place, and in this way expenses grew and multiplied, and the extra fifty pounds a year were quickly swallowed up and lost.

Robert Morton soon fell back into his old condition of pessimism and doubt. The people who deserved the least seemed to get the best time of it. The hardest worker generally got the worst pay, and those who rolled in wealth did nothing for it. The honest man was shunted or trampled to death by the crowd, the rogue received honour and distinction and applause. He really saw no good in being honest and industrious, and squeamish on little points of so-called honour. Honour and integrity and industry were pretty words, and sounded well, but in the rough and tumble of the world they were in the way. Those who discarded such encumbrances appeared to get on the best; he had been as particular as any man could be, and what was he the better for it?

So year by year his faith and hope had dwindled, and religion in his eyes seemed but a superstition, that the clergy kept alive for their own gain and advantage. He went to church as in duty bound, for it was a tradition in Graystone that the day-school master should lead the singing in church on Sundays, and, if need be, preside at the organ.

But, as time went on, he began to dislike Sunday more than any other day in the week. He believed nothing that he heard, felt the truth of nothing that he sang. It was all to him a vain show, a silly meaningless performance. The dear old vicar, who

was nearly ninety, droned out Sunday by Sunday a series of juiceless platitudes, and stumbled through the lessons and prayers in the most perfunctory way. He had done the same thing in the same church for sixty years, until he had lost even the semblance of enthusiasm or conviction.

That he was a good man, simple-hearted and sincere, all admitted, and everybody loved him; but he had outlived his day and generation, outlived his own enthusiasm, outlived the thrill and ecstasy of his earlier ministry.

But two years before our story opens he fell on sleep, and was gathered to his fathers, and Melville Grant, first cousin of Lord Menheniot and heir-presumptive to Graystone, was inducted into the vacant living.

The new vicar was an energetic man, and soon wrought a revolution in the place. Some of the old villagers looked on with wonder and even alarm at the novelties that were introduced. But the new order of things was no more helpful to Robert Morton than the old. If anything, it intensified the cynicism that had already rooted itself deeply in his heart, and quenched the last spark of reverence that he possessed.

He had no idea whither he was drifting. Indeed, he was not conscious that he was adrift at all. He had loosened his moorings so gradually and imperceptibly that, when the tide began to bear him away from the old place of anchorage, he was sublimely unconscious of it. He did not see the rocks in the near distance, nor hear the roar of the breakers.

On the morning in question he ate his breakfast in

silence, and then went out into the sunshine again, and sauntered slowly along the quiet lane in the direction of the village. He had plenty of time at his disposal, for the school did not open till nine. Once or twice he paused and rested his elbows on a gate, and looked wearily across the green pasturage, and wondered—as he had often wondered lately—how or in what way he would be able to meet the financial crisis that was so swiftly overtaking him.

Had he been endowed with clearer vision he might have seen that the crisis that was overtaking him was not merely financial—that that indeed was the least fateful feature in it,—that a great moral crisis was approaching, the issues of which no one could foresee or measure.

There is a common belief that coming events cast their shadows before. They may do sometimes, but they do not do so always, nor even often. It is generally the unexpected that happens. Fate is tricky, and loves to tease us and cheat us and lure us on with hopes that end in nothing.

Robert Morton saw the forces gathering in one direction, but the real forces were gathering in quite another, gathering without sign or sound, or the faintest stirring of the air. He expected battle, but the battle was to be of a kind that he had not dreamed of, and he was but ill prepared for the encounter.

CHAPTER II.

TWO MEN AND A MAID.

DIRECTLY breakfast was over Harry went back to his books and worked steadily at them till lunch time, after which he lighted a cigarette and took a stroll for the benefit of his health. His step was a little less buoyant than usual. The pinch of poverty was affecting his spirits unconsciously, he had begun to question whether in his position in life it was not a foolish thing to aspire to one of the learned professions.

Yet to give up the prospect now, and go back again to the drudgery and monotony of the day-school teacher, was too terrible to contemplate. For the last five years he had been working almost night and day. Teaching in the daytime, cramming at night. A month ago he gave up going to the school so that he might give six months of undivided attention to preparation for his final, but there had been fees and dinners and numberless incidentals which had been heartbreaking both to his father and to himself, and now the creditors had begun to clamour and threaten for their money.

Harry walked slowly for some little distance down the road, past the lodge gates of Graystone, then turning suddenly to the left he vaulted lightly over a stile, and struck a footpath leading across the

fields in the direction of Minver, three miles away. At one point this ancient footpath cut across a corner of Graystone Park and brought the stately and turreted old hall well into sight.

It was a favourite walk of Harry's. He liked the open field path, the air was so much fresher than in the lanes. He liked the shadow of the trees in the summer-time. He liked to listen to the dreamy murmur of the wind through their branches, he liked the smell of the wild flowers. Above all he liked to catch a glimpse of Monica Stuart as she sauntered across the lawn among the banks of roses and fuchsias, the sweetest flower of them all.

Monica was a bright, winsome girl of eighteen. She had not made her *début* in society yet. She was to be presented at the next Drawing-room. Harry was sixteen and she was twelve when they first met, both too young to consider the question of social distinctions. They liked each other from their first meeting, and in Harry's case the liking had ripened into something very near akin to love. He knew from the first that his passion was hopeless, and now and then had struggled bravely to overcome it, and but for the field-path cutting across the park, and the chances that it gave of seeing and even speaking with Monica, he might have conquered his love. But every time he met her added fresh fuel to the fire. She was always so free and sweet and gracious with him. Had he been heir to an earldom instead of only a schoolmaster's son, she could not have treated him with more respect.

Of late a pang of jealousy had been added to his love. Rupert Grant, the vicar's son, had begun to

pay Monica very marked attention, and whispers had been current in the village that they were to be formally engaged when Monica was nineteen.

From a social point of view the alliance seemed a very proper and desirable one. The vicar was heir to Graystone, but since he was as old as the Earl within a year, the chances were that Lord Menheniot might outlive him, in which case Rupert would be heir-at-law. In any case, providing he lived long enough, he would sooner or later succeed to the title and estate. Monica was an orphan, and the only child of the late Sir Lawrence Stuart, of Brynwild, Buckinghamshire, and consequently heiress to a considerable portion of the vast wealth he left behind him.

From every point of view, therefore, Monica would be a very desirable match. At the present time Rupert was as impecunious as Harry, but, since his credit was good, he did not feel to the same extent the pinch of poverty. He had been called to the Bar two years previously. And at that point his acquaintance with the law stopped suddenly short. As yet he had never been entrusted with a brief; as a matter of fact, he had made no real attempt to practise as a barrister. Like many another scion of the privileged classes, he had been hanging round Westminster in the hopes that his good looks, his poverty, and his prospective title would win him a sinecure with a decent salary attached. As yet, however, it had not come off. A good many crumbs had fallen, but it so happened that the mouths had been more numerous than the crumbs. There appears to be a disproportionate number of younger

sons, and to find decent posts for all of them is a matter of no small difficulty.

Meanwhile, however, Rupert's thoughts had turned (not for the first time) towards matrimony. Monica had suddenly sprung from a girl into a woman, and an exceedingly pretty woman, too. He had thought little of her as a girl; as a matter of fact, he was seven years her senior, and all girls were more or less alike in his eyes—lank, gawky, and, generally speaking, disagreeable.

But the passing from girlhood into young womanhood had in Monica's case registered a wonderful change. At least, so it had appeared to him. He was quite charmed when he first saw her after her hair had been done up in a shining coil at the back of her head.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "Monica is a woman and marriageable," and he began to make more particular inquiries as to the amount of her wealth and the conditions attached to the same. These conditions he found to be quite satisfactory from his point of view. Monica had pin-money enough now to keep him in comfort, and, when she was twenty-one, she would be mistress of her own estates.

"Courting Monica," he chuckled, "will be more interesting than hanging round Westminster. By Jove, she is pretty, and all the prettier for being so well gilded. The only difficulty in the way is——" but he did not finish the sentence.

Monica, however, was not particularly flattered by his attentions, and she took no pains to hide the fact. She might be a woman in appearance, but she was

only a girl at heart, and had not yet learned to dissemble and play the hypocrite. In fact, only a week or two before our story opens, she had deliberately left Rupert's side in the middle of a sentence and hurried across the park to speak to Harry Morton, who had suddenly come in sight.

Rupert's brow clouded as he watched her talking to the ex-school teacher.

"Well, I wonder what next," he said to himself; "she will have to understand what her true position is. Evidently, by the way she smiles and chatters, this is not the first *tête-à-tête* they have had. Of course, the fellow will be only too delighted to be noticed by her. I wonder if Menheniot knows?—for if not, it is about time he was told. As her guardian, he will have to look after her."

He did not attempt to follow Monica, but sauntered to and fro on the edge of the lawn, and watched the young people from under his eyebrows.

When at length Monica returned to him, radiant and smiling, he gently took her to task for her indiscretion.

"Do you know that young man to whom you have been speaking?" he said, quite gravely and seriously.

"Why, of course I know him, Rupert. Do you think I would run across the park to speak to some one I did not know?" and she laughed brightly, as though the suggestion were altogether too absurd.

"But have you ever considered the difference in your social positions?" he said in the same grave tones.

"I am afraid I have not," she answered, with a smile; "what are they?"

"Oh fie, fie," he said, patronisingly; "you surely know that he is only the son of a schoolmaster."

"And you are only the son of a vicar, so what's the difference?"

"I should hope there is a great deal of difference."

"Well, yes; one preaches to big folks in a church, and the other teaches small folks in a schoolroom; and isn't it as honourable to teach little folks as big ones?"

"I'm afraid you do not understand, Monica," he said, in aggrieved tones; "you must remember that my father is a Grant."

"And his father is a Morton."

"But who are the Mortons? Surely they are not the kind of people for the daughter of Sir Lawrence Stuart to associate with."

"And why not? Sir Lawrence Stuart was only a working man when he was young; I've heard him say so again and again. He made all his money promoting railways in Brazil, and then he came home and got married when he was fifty, and went into Parliament, and gave heaps of money, and got knighted. Oh, you think I'm only a girl and don't know anything, but I do." And her delicate nostrils expanded, and her eyes shone with a seriousness that he had never seen in them before.

"I am afraid this is scarcely to the point," he said, stiffly. "You must remember, Monica, that you are a woman now, and there are certain proprieties to be observed, and it ——"

"Oh, indeed," she interrupted; "then I think you might address me as Miss Stuart."

"Ah, now you are cross, and I would not vex you for the world. I assure you I have only your good and happiness at heart, and I really do not think it is for your good that you should go bounding across the grounds to speak to every Dick, Tom, and Harry that may cross the park."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Rupert Grant," she said, half petulantly, half mischievously. "I do not speak to every Harry that crosses the park, only to one of them; and he is going to be a barrister, and so will be quite equal to you soon, if he is not so already."

Rupert bit his lip and was silent. He felt that he was getting along very badly. If he was to win Monica Stuart and share her fortune he must try another method; evidently she was not to be driven, and yet there was danger in a romantic girl of eighteen, with outrageously radical tendencies, meeting a handsome young fellow like Harry Morton without let or hindrance. What was to be done? That he was not the person to advise her was evident. He would speak to his father. His father would counsel the earl, and so the matter would be settled.

Monica had not seen Harry since that day, and wondered why. She knew that he was working hard, but she knew also that when the weather was fine he invariably took a long walk in the afternoon, and of late the weather had been glorious. It was strange, therefore, that she had never seen him crossing the park.

Harry had equally wondered why Monica had so persistently kept out of his sight. Had she done so of deliberate purpose? or had her guardian been using his influence?

He knew that their casual meetings and pleasant conversations would have to end sooner or later. Monica was no longer a girl. Her life was far apart from his. Between the rich and poor a great gulf was fixed. She would soon be moving in the inner circle of what the world was pleased to call Society, the laws of which were as rigid and inflexible as those of the Medes and Persians.

He had no feeling of resentment in his heart against this arrangement. He did not rail against social inequalities and denounce all class distinctions. Generally speaking, the poor accept their lot with a dumb fatalistic resignation. Things are as they are, and cannot be altered. They will neither whine on the one hand, nor submit to be patronised on the other.

Harry shared the common feeling of his class. He was born in a cottage, hence the mansions of the rich were as much out of his reach as the North Pole, and he pined for neither. He belonged to the common people, and between him and the privileged and aristocratic classes there could be no intercourse. It was of no use beating the air or flinging dust in the teeth of the storm. He accepted the position. He would feel the pain directly, when his bright-hued bird unfolded her wings and flew away from him, but it could not be helped. He would endure silently, that was the privilege of the poor. They were always enduring, and he could suffer as silently as the rest.

As he crossed the park this sunshiny afternoon, and looked towards the grey-stone mansion, and lingered at the stile, and looked again, he wondered if the end had come already to the pleasant dream that had held him in thrall so long, and if for the future only the memory of it would remain. He had no right to expect her, he knew. She belonged to a different world from his. Perhaps she had realised this at last, and from henceforth would pass him by on the other side. He turned, after he had vaulted over the stile, and looked once more, but she was nowhere visible, and with a little sigh he lifted his head and quickened his steps in the direction of Minver.

Across two fields, and then a tall bank of earth covered with brushwood formed the boundary between two farms, and blocked the distant landscape. A quaint stile, half wood, half stone, carried the path over the hedge into the next field.

Harry marched resolutely forward at a swinging pace until he reached this stile, then he stopped suddenly, and his lips parted in an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

Peeping over the stile were the sweet eyes of Monica.

"I saw you coming," she said, in her free, careless fashion, "and waited."

"Are you going in the direction of Minver?" he asked.

"No ; I've been there and am now returning."

"Oh, I see."

"It was better than meeting in the middle of a field," she said, with a laugh, "for I can sit here in the shade while you talk."

"It seems quite an age since I saw you," he said, uneasily.

"And the last time you did see me you seemed in a great hurry to get away."

"I knew that Mr. Rupert Grant was waiting for you."

"And what of that?"

"Well, it was scarcely my place to come between you."

"He wastes a great deal of my time as it is," she said, with a pout, "and any excuse for getting away from him is welcome."

Harry's face brightened, for he had been fearing something very different.

"I thought his company was always welcome," he said, with a laugh.

"And that your own was disagreeable, as you have kept so much out of my way?"

"No, Monica, I have not thought that exactly. Only I know, of course, that things cannot continue as they are. You have been very kind to me, but I think we have both forgotten that we belong to different hemispheres, if I may so speak."

"You mean that I have more money, and live in a bigger house than you?"

"Yes, with all that that implies."

"I thought you knew me better, Harry. As if that could make any difference."

"It must make a difference, sooner or later, Monica. You don't see it yet, perhaps, but you will see it later on. We are all of us the creatures of circumstances. As soon as we begin to think and feel we discover that we are in a cage. For a while

we may bruise ourselves against the bars, but we soon settle down to the inevitable, and try to make the best of it."

"And you mean to say that I am in a cage?"

"Undeniably, and you will find it out quite soon enough. It may be a gilded one. It may be more than usually spacious, but the bars hedge you round on every side. You have not found your wings yet; when you do you will find what convention means, and what a stern jailor custom can be."

"And where will you be?"

"I shall be caged also," he said, smiling, "only my cage will not be gilded. It will also be very narrow and cold, and possibly I shall eat my heart out in it, and wish that I had never been born."

"And will your cage be near mine?"

"Oh no," he said, with a laugh, "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans."

"And you are a Jew, are you?" and she laughed a sweet musical laugh.

"I see you don't believe me," he said, turning from her, and looking across the fields. "I sometimes wish things were otherwise. If you were only of the people we might be friends always, and—and some day, perhaps—who knows?—but there, what's the use of talking? If money grew on thorns we should all be rich."

"I think you have been working too hard," she said, with a smile. "What's to hinder us from being friends always?"

He turned and looked at her again, and she met his grave looks with frank, laughing eyes. She was the sweetest, most winsome maiden he believed that

ever was, and there could never be one like her again.

“If I could only think so, Monica,” he said, “nothing would be too hard, nothing too painful. I would rather have your friendship than wealth, and a smile from you——”

“Why, here comes Rupert Grant,” she said, interrupting, “and with a face like a congested thundercloud.”

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN INTERVENES.

HARRY looked over his shoulder and his face darkened. He had never liked Rupert Grant, and he liked him less every day. His airs and graces angered him, his marked attention to Monica made him jealous, his present appearance seemed an impertinence.

"He will be reading me another lecture, I expect," Monica said, with a pout.

"Another lecture?" Harry questioned. "Has he lectured you before?"

"You should have heard him when I ran across the lawn to speak to you the other day."

"The prig! What concern is that of his, I wonder."

"That is what I wonder. But he looks as if he meant mischief this time. See how his mouth is working. He might be a cow chewing its cud."

Harry laughed, but he did not look round. Monica was still perched on the stile, her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. Harry stood a pace or two away. She made so pretty a picture that he fancied that he would never tire looking at her. Moreover, he was haunted by a vague foreboding that he might never come so near to her again.

He heard Rupert Grant's footstep coming nearer

and nearer. He saw by the look in Monica's eyes that she was watching his approach. He wondered which of them would speak first. Monica was looking very demure and determined, her pretty lips were set tightly together.

Rupert was the first to speak.

"Good afternoon, Monica," he said, in his blandest tones. "I scarcely expected to find you so far away from home."

"No?"

Rupert coughed and looked uneasy. The situation for the moment was embarrassing. He could not forget that Harry Morton was present, though he absolutely ignored him; Monica was distinctly unfriendly, which angered him.

"I hope you do not often venture into these fields unprotected," he remarked at length.

"Why not?" the words came sharp and abrupt.

"Well, because it seems to me neither proper nor safe."

"Indeed."

"And I feel sure Lord Menheniot would not approve, if he knew."

"My guardian is able to speak for himself."

Rupert bit his lip, and his eyes blazed, but he kept himself well in hand.

"You should not get angry with your friends, Monica," he said, mildly. "Will you not allow me to see you home?"

"Thank you, I am not a child; besides, you were going the other way."

"But my time is at my own disposal, and, I may add, at yours."

"Thank you, I do not need company; besides, I am not alone, as you see. I presume you know Mr. Harry Morton."

"No, I have not the honour of his acquaintance."

"Allow me to introduce you," and she smiled mischievously. "Mr.——"

"I do not desire an introduction," he interrupted, angrily; "what we say to each other can be said without such formality," and he turned and darted an angry and meaning glance at Harry.

"I am at your service at any time," the latter answered, and his lip curled unconsciously.

"I am going in the direction of Minver," and he raised his hat to Monica, while she moved aside for him to get over the stile. She did not speak to him, but when Harry turned to follow she held out her hand to him, and gave him one of her sweetest smiles.

"I hope those two young men won't quarrel," she said to herself, as she seated herself on the stile once more. Then a smile spread itself over her face like a ray of sunshine. The possibility of a quarrel evidently did not trouble her.

Meanwhile, Rupert Grant had crossed the adjoining field and entered on the one beyond it. Here he waited for Harry to come up. He did not wait long. Harry was tingling with impatience to meet the man who had so openly snubbed him.

"Do you know what I think of fellows of your stamp?" Rupert said, with flashing eyes, as Harry drew near.

"I neither know nor care what you think," was the reply, "but you may be interested to know that I consider you a contemptible cad."

"You do, eh? How interesting! It is possible, however, that you may hold a somewhat different opinion before I have done with you."

"Possibly, but I shall never think you a gentleman in any case."

"What you think can never be of any account," was the sneering reply; "such as you do not know what a gentleman is. If you had the faintest instinct of a gentleman I should not have found you where I did to-day."

"Indeed?—I believe this is a public footpath."

"And the greater pity when such as you are allowed to prowl about and work mischief."

"Now you are getting interesting. Please proceed."

"Bah! if you were not a low-born brute I might appeal to you. What right have you to be seen speaking to Miss Stuart?"

"May I ask who are you, and by what right you ask any such question?"

"I have every right. Miss Stuart is my cousin's ward, as you know very well—to say nothing of any closer relationship that may exist in the future. Everything that concerns her, indirectly concerns me. You know that you have no right to force your presence upon her, and yet you do it constantly. You take advantage of her youth and of her quixotic and adventurous temperament. You waylay her as she is crossing the fields——"

"It is a lie, sir, and you know it," Harry hissed, while his eyes flashed fire.

"Have I not just met you together?" was the reply, "you talking to her as though there was no

difference in your social positions, looking at her with your bold eyes as though you were her equal. I tell you, sir, it is intolerable."

"It is true you found me talking to Miss Stuart. She was returning from Minver, and sat down on the stile, and waited for me to come up. Should I refuse to speak to her when she spoke to me—am I to be rude, because I am of humble birth? We have known each other since we were children, almost; and I have as much right to speak to her as you have. It is no fault of mine that she does not favour your attentions."

"What is that?" and Rupert grew livid with rage. "Do you dare to insinuate——"

"I insinuate nothing, I am in the habit of speaking plainly; and certainly Miss Stuart did not seem greatly flattered by your presence, a few minutes since."

"And whose fault was that? It was because you with your hateful tongue had been trying to poison her mind." And Rupert clenched his fists and came a step nearer his opponent.

"I deny your accusation," Harry said, bitingly, "and if you were not such a cad you would not suggest such a thing."

"Call me a cad again," the other hissed, "and you will rue it."

"I repeat it," Harry answered, "you are a jealous, cowardly cad."

The answer came sudden as a flash, and Harry reeled before the stinging blow that caught him just above the left ear.

He recovered himself, however, instantly, and

leaped upon his opponent like an infuriated tiger, dealing him a blow between the eyes that fairly stunned him.

A moment or two later they had both of them thrown off their coats and were glaring and lunging at each other like a pair of savages. For several minutes the blows fell fast and furious. They were pretty evenly matched, and neither of them for a while seemed to gain any advantage. Both were in a white heat of passion, both reckless and determined, both insensible to pain. The surface had been scratched, and the savage had been discovered underneath.

Had they been less blinded by passion, they would have fought with more skill. Harry, if anything, was the more collected of the two, and parried perhaps the greater number of blows, but it was an encounter they would both feel ashamed of later on. There was no skill or science on either side. It was just a trial of brute strength and endurance. Backward and forward they swayed and lunged, hitting out wildly and recklessly, lost to all sense of fairness and compassion, each bent on punishing the other and caring nothing that he was being punished himself.

It became at length a question of endurance, the blows fell more and more slowly and feebly, their heavy breathing could be heard half a field away. Their strained and knotted muscles had reached the utmost limit of tension, a mist was coming up before their eyes, so that they could hardly see each other.

Monica, seated on the stile a little more than a

field away, woke from her daydream at length, and sprang to her feet.

"I don't feel quite easy about those boys," she said, knitting her fair brows, "I hope they have not quarrelled with each other," and she climbed to the highest point of the stile, and looked across the field. Through a gap in the further hedge, she saw something white swaying to and fro.

"Oh, I do hope——" and she sprang down on the further side without completing the sentence and hurried swiftly across the field. She cleared the next stile almost at a bound, and then she stood stock-still, too horrified to cry out or even to move. It was only for a moment, however. Setting her teeth firmly together, and clenching her small hands, she rushed up to the combatants. They did not see her, they were almost blind.

For another moment she stood fascinated by the savage energy with which they threw themselves at each other. Then, as they drew apart to regain their breath, she rushed in between them.

"Cowards," she cried, "cowards, both of you."

"Get out of the way," Rupert gasped, "and let me kill him."

"He is more likely to kill you, by present appearances," she said.

"I'd rather be killed than own myself beaten by a clown," he almost shrieked. "I tell you, get out of the way."

"I will not get out of the way," she cried, wondering at her own courage, "I'm ashamed of you both. Which struck the first blow?"

"I did," Rupert answered, savagely, "and I'll strike the last."

"Will you?" she answered. "I'll know first why you began the quarrel."

"He called me a cad, a contemptible cad, and I punched his head for it."

"Did you call names?" she said, turning upon Harry, fiercely.

"I did; he has spoken the truth."

"And why did you do so?"

"You had better ask him," he said, with a wave of his hand.

"I spoke in defence of you," Rupert snarled; "you were the cause."

"Defence?" she questioned, looking from one to the other.

"He said that I waylaid you in the fields, that I forced my hateful presence upon you, that I tried to poison your mind, that——"

"And I spoke the truth," Rupert interrupted, with a savage gleam in his eyes.

She turned upon him instantly, with scorn and anger shining in her eyes. He met her gaze surlily and defiantly.

"You could say that, could you?" she said, slowly and calmly.

"I could, and I do," was the dogged answer.

For a moment or two she stood between them without speaking. She was very pale, and her lip trembled painfully; then, drawing herself up, she said, "Go down to the stream, both of you, and wash yourselves; you are not fit for any one to see. Go before any one comes this

way. Oh, I am more ashamed of you than I can say."

They were both devoutly ashamed of themselves by this time, and taking their coats they slunk away to different corners of the field, and quickly plunged their faces into the clear stream that marked its boundary.

Harry seemed little the worse. After he had washed himself Monica saw him leap lightly across the stream and make his way through the fields in the direction of Graystone village. Rupert, on the contrary, moved slowly and painfully, and when at length he returned to where she was still waiting, he cut but a sorry figure.

Monica looked at him almost pityingly. He had been more punished than he knew. Harry's blows had evidently told.

"You seem to have got the worst of it," she said, regarding him curiously.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," he answered, with a poor attempt at a laugh. "I've given him what he won't forget for a fortnight, and if you had not come up when you did I would have made mincemeat of him."

"Oh, would you?" she said, trying hard not to smile, "and what would he have made of you?"

"Oh, nothing; I tell you he was absolutely winded when you came up."

"He seems to have quickly recovered," she answered, drily.

"He won't recover so quickly next time," was the surly reply.

"Look here," she said, with a sudden flash in her

eyes, "you began this quarrel and you know it. What is more, I know why; and let me tell you I will not have you nor any one else spying upon me. You are not my guardian, and I resent your interference."

"But, Monica ——" he began.

"Please wait till I have finished. I am no longer a child, as you have told me more than once lately. I am able to look after myself, and I will not be dictated to by you, at any rate, as to whom I shall speak to, or where I shall go. You have assumed a great deal too much lately, and I don't like it, and what is more, if you pick another quarrel with Harry Morton I'll never speak to you again as long as I live."

"I'll kill him," he hissed, savagely.

"There's not much fear of that," was the reply. "Now you had better get home as quickly as possible, and don't attempt to show yourself for a week at least."

"And why not?" he asked, sullenly.

"Because you are not fit to be seen. Now take my advice and get off home before any one comes along."

"But, Monica," he pleaded, suddenly changing his tone, "don't be hard on a fellow. If I have seemed interfering it is because of my reverence for you. You are young and quixotic, and don't know men as I know them. Believe me, Monica, that that clown I thrashed just now is not a fit person for you to associate with in any way, or even to be seen speaking to. There are certain things, as you know, that we cannot do with impunity——"

"Such as trying to thrash somebody stronger than yourself, to wit."

"Don't be cynical, Monica. You are angry with me, I know, but some day you will discover that you have no truer friend than I——"

"I don't like my friends to boast of what they are; I like to find out without being told."

"Can I do nothing to please you?" he said, in low, insinuating tones, while an angry frown swept across his face.

"Yes, you can please me by doing what I tell you, and by keeping out of mischief in the future."

For a moment he looked at her in silence, then, raising his hat, he walked slowly and painfully away.

Monica returned to Graystone Hall in a very sober frame of mind. She had been awakened that afternoon as from a dream. The dream had been a pleasant one. She had known nothing of love or hate, fear or disappointment, strife or unrest. She had been as a butterfly in the sunshine and among the flowers. Now everything seemed changed. The dream was at an end. The reality was before her.

She had listened to words from both Rupert and Harry that meant more than the ordinary common-places of conversation. But what did they mean? Why was Rupert so attentive, so solicitous, so anxious to shield her? Why did Harry say that if he could be sure of her friendship nothing would seem too hard or painful?

"And a smile from you——" he had said, and she had interrupted him. Why did he want her smile?

Why did there come into his voice a different and a deeper tone?

Then she caught her breath suddenly, and a startled look came into her eyes. The truth was beginning to unfold itself.

Life could never be the same for her again after that afternoon, and the day was not done yet. There was time for much more to happen before the sunset.

When, an hour later, she saw the vicar hurrying almost breathlessly up to the house, she felt as though mischief were brewing, and, as the sequel showed, she was not mistaken.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

HARRY had just sat down to a simple meal of dry toast and stewed fruit, when Lord Menheniot's butler was espied coming up the garden path. A moment or two later a note was handed to him, which he opened instantly and flushed hotly as he read.

Robert Morton looked up with an anxious and questioning look in his eyes. Madge paused in the middle of pouring out a cup of tea. Dora and her mother also looked curiously in Harry's direction. Bob was the only one of the party who remained uninterested and unconcerned.

"Lord Menheniot wants to see me this evening, that's all," Harry said, as he replaced the note in the envelope. He spoke quite calmly and with apparent unconcern, but Madge, who shared most of his secrets, was quick to notice that he was very considerably excited.

"He gives no reason why he wishes to see you?" Robert Morton asked, anxiously.

"None whatever. He simply asks me to come up to the Hall this evening, as he wishes to see me."

"Perhaps it is about the matter I referred to this morning," Robert said, with a little sigh.

To this Harry made no reply, but rose and went

into the lobby, where the butler was waiting for an answer.

"Tell Lord Menheniot that I will come on in a few minutes," he said.

"Yes, sir," and that functionary at once took his departure.

Five minutes later Harry was following him. He felt very stiff and sore about the chest and shoulders. Fortunately for him his face bore very few signs of his encounter with Rupert Grant, and no one in his home except Madge knew anything of his afternoon adventure.

"Father will have to give up the hope that the Earl will ever do anything for me after this," he reflected, as he hurried along the well-kept drive in the direction of the Hall.

He felt quite certain in his own mind why he had been sent for. Either the vicar or Rupert himself had gone to Lord Menheniot with his version of the story. The most, no doubt, would be made of his accidental meeting with Monica. That his conduct would be painted in the blackest colours was a foregone conclusion. Most likely the interview would be a painful one.

"At any rate, I shall be glad to get it over as quickly as possible," he reflected. "It will be farewell to my pleasant little talks with Monica."

As he got near the house, he noticed that she was standing at one of the downstairs windows. Did she know he had been sent for? he wondered. Would she recognise him? A few minutes later this latter question was answered. She waved her hand to him and smiled.

He raised his hat and passed on to the door and rang.

"She is not so very angry with me after all," he reflected, while waiting for the door to open. Then his brow clouded. "Better she were angry," he thought, bitterly, "her very kindness encourages me to think of her when I ought to be doing my best to forget her. I'm a fool for letting my thoughts run in her direction at all."

Then the door was opened and he was ushered across the broad hall to Lord Menheniot's private room. The door was thrown open at once; he heard his name announced and the door closed behind him; but a swift glance about the room showed him that its owner was not present. The servant had evidently taken it for granted that his master was within.

Harry seated himself on the nearest chair and waited. It was not an apartment to overawe even the poorest. The carpet was almost threadbare, the furniture was of the simplest. Against the wall, not far from where he sat, was an open desk, with any number of papers lying about; on the flap nearest him was a cheque-book wide open. "The City Bank, Limited"—he could read the words quite distinctly. Opposite was a book-case covering the whole side of the room.

He took in all these details at a glance. Then the door opened and the Earl came hurriedly into the room. Harry rose to his feet at once, holding his hat in his hand. The Earl started visibly. "I beg pardon," he said, "I did not know you were here. Have you been waiting long?"

“Not five minutes at the outside.”

The Earl looked angry and turned to the desk, muttering something about a simpleton that ought to have known better. Then he swept up all the papers and shut the desk with an impatient gesture.

He was a tall, good-looking man of about fifty-five. His hair and beard were iron-grey, his eyes deep-set and penetrating, his nose straight and well-formed, his mouth firm and determined.

“Sit down,” he said, abruptly, turning to Harry; and he went and took a chair directly opposite.

Harry obeyed, though not without misgiving. He saw that “my lord” was in an exceedingly bad temper, and so prepared himself for a warm time.

Lord Menheniot was in no humour to beat about the bush.

“The vicar tells me,” he said, abruptly, “that you have been behaving yourself in a very discreditable fashion lately.”

“Indeed, my lord, may I ask in what way?”

“Unfortunately in various ways. The most recent appears to be a case of assault and battery.”

“You refer to my encounter with Mr. Rupert Grant?”

“Encounter, do you call it?” and the Earl laughed cynically. “The vicar calls it by a very different name. Because Rupert spoke to you about behaving disrespectfully to my ward you sprang upon him like a raging lunatic, and nearly battered the life out of him. The vicar says he will not be fit to be seen for a month.”

Harry smiled. “I cannot say I am sorry he has come off so badly,” he answered, “but with respect

to the charge of treating Miss Stuart with disrespect I think the lady herself is most competent to answer that."

"H'm—yes—perhaps so. But proceed."

"I have only to add, sir, that for the vicar to say I sprang upon his son like a raging lunatic is a perversion of the truth. He struck me first, and I own I have not grace enough yet to turn the other cheek."

"Oh, well, that is neither here nor there. If he struck the first blow, you gave him abundant provocation. Perhaps Monica is as much to blame as you, though in her case indiscretion is excusable since she is scarcely more than a child in years: you are old enough to do what is right."

"I am not aware that I have done otherwise," Harry answered, with spirit.

"We are all prejudiced in our own favour doubtless," the Earl answered, cynically. "But I am bound to take Rupert's point of view. Let us speak plainly. Rupert hopes some day that Monica will be his wife. I hope so, too. It will be a most desirable arrangement from every point of view. Rupert will be master of Graystone if he lives, and who could preside in this house with more grace than Monica? But here is the difficulty: Monica shows no preference for him at the present. In fact, as far as I can see, she would sooner be in your company than his. That, of course, is absurd. You see I am taking you fully into my confidence. I have always been interested in you—I am still. I encouraged your father to allow you to read for the Bar. I have allowed you and Monica to be a good

deal together. Foolishly, perhaps. But the time is now past for that. You are not of the same walk in life. You understand me?"

"Quite."

"Very good. Monica's friendliness and kindly feeling for you may not be without its danger, from Rupert's point of view. She is young, impulsive, not to say quixotic. It will be better, therefore, that the old condition of things ends at once."

"I understand."

"I am glad. Had it been anyone else I should not have taken the trouble to explain things. I should have used more summary measures, but in a remote sense you have been a kind of *protégé* of mine, and I shall be always interested in your success."

"Thank you, sir; I am sure I appreciate your kindness."

"And I may rely on your carrying out my wishes?"

"After to-day, sir, you shall have no further cause of complaint," and Harry bowed himself out of the room.

The Earl took two or three turns round the room and knitted his brows. "I've let the young dog off very easily," he said to himself, "much too easily. I meant to have spoken very sharply to him, but somehow his manner disarms me."

Harry went away congratulating himself. He had expected a warm time of it, especially when he found the master of Graystone in such a bad temper. Nevertheless, his satisfaction was mixed with a good deal of pain and disappointment. Somehow Monica

had become entwined in every hope and dream of his life, and to be denied the pleasure of another smile from her, to meet and pass without a word, to drift suddenly apart and become utter strangers, to lose for ever the brightness and inspiration of her presence—well, to say the least—was not a pleasant prospect to contemplate. Of course he had seen it coming for months and years, and was in some measure prepared for it; but no preparation or anticipation will take all the sting out of loss or calamity.

He looked back at the windows as he was leaving, hoping for a last smile from Monica; but if she saw him leave, it had grown too dark for him to see her. The long and glorious summer day was swiftly fading into night. Far above his head the sky seemed bright and luminous still, but across the wide landscape the fine web of night was being woven. The distant trees had lost all shape and individuality, and loomed up against the sky like banks of cloud. The air was warm and stagnant. A bat swooped down and nearly touched him, then suddenly veered off in another direction, and vanished in the swiftly-gathering gloom. A moment later a blind beetle boomed slowly past him, lost its way, and struck the ground heavily.

“Stupid beetle!” he said to himself and smiled. Then a moment later, “I wonder if I am not quite as stupid and just as blind.”

Down under the trees it was almost dark. Then a white figure came out of the shadow and stood before him.

“Is that you, Harry?”

"Monica!" and his heart gave a great bound.

"I know there's some kind of mischief hatching," she said; "tell me all about it."

She stood close before him, and he took her small white hands and held them in his. He had never done so before, and he could not have told why he did so now. It was a sudden impulse, and she did not resent it. Her soft, warm hands lay in his, as if they had found a safe resting-place. Yet the very next moment an uneasy, not to say guilty, feeling stole over him.

"You ought not to have met me here, Monica," he said, "your guardian would be very angry if he knew."

"Very likely," she answered; "but I can't help that. Tell me why he sent for you."

"It grew out of the affair of this afternoon," he said. "The vicar has been to see him."

"Yes, I know; I saw him come."

"Well, he seems to have opened the Earl's eyes to a few things. Anyhow, I have promised not to be seen again in your company after to-day."

"But why, Harry? Why this sudden right-about-face?"

"For the very reasons I mentioned to you before. Your guardian seems almost to regret having made so much of me as he has done, and permitting me to have the run of the grounds and in some measure of the house. You know, Monica, he has been very good to me, and has treated me as though I occupied a very different station."

"Yes, he has always thought a great deal of you. I have heard him speak in your praise many times,

and that makes it all the more difficult to understand why he has turned against you now."

"I don't think he has turned against me, only he sees that we are no longer children, and you know that many things are allowable in children that would never be tolerated when they grew up."

"Then I wish I had never grown up," she said, hastily, and she stamped her little foot. "It seems so silly that when you are a child and can't take care of yourself you are allowed every liberty almost, and directly you are able to take care of yourself you are treated as though you were an infant or an imbecile."

"There are proprieties, you know," he said, with a grave smile, "and even the rich and titled cannot afford to ignore Mrs. Grundy——"

"But what am I to do?" she said, complainingly. "In this dull place there is nobody, except the vicar's wife, that I am allowed to associate with, and she's old enough to be my grandmother. Other girls can have any number of companions, but just because I'm an earl's ward I'm shut up in a prison and not allowed to see anybody. I wish I was the daughter of a farmer or a shopkeeper—I do really."

"But you will go into society soon. Isn't the Earl going to set up a town house next winter?"

"He talks about it; but what of that? One can be just as lonely and dull in London as here."

"Oh, I don't think you will be dull when you once get into the swing of society. But you must not stay any longer, Monica, or you will be getting yourself into trouble."

"And when we meet again——?"

"We shall be strangers," he said.

"You do not seem to mind very much," she answered, still allowing her hands to nestle in his.

"Not mind, Monica? Oh, please do not make it harder for me than it is. But I am older than you, and perhaps realise more clearly the inevitable."

Something in his tone struck her, and she looked searchingly into his face.

"Then you are sorry," she said, after a pause, "that we are to be no longer friends?"

"Sorry?" and he turned his head aside with an impatient movement. "Oh, but I shall get over it in time."

"Get over what, Harry?" she pleaded, looking earnestly into his eyes.

"I cannot tell you, Monica—I really cannot."

"But you must tell me, Harry."

"No, no," he cried, in tones of real distress; "I cannot. It would be wrong to do so," and he dropped her hands suddenly and turned away.

But she laid her hands quickly on his arm.

"You must not go till you have told me," she pleaded. "What can it matter? After to-night we are to be strangers, you say, and shall not know each other when we meet."

"And is not that a sufficient reason of itself?"

"No, it is not, and if you won't tell me I shall know very well that you don't care a bit."

"Oh, Monica, you drive me to desperation. Why should I put it into plain words? You must have guessed already. You are more to me than life, more than heaven itself. It will be worse than

death to me to lose your smile. Oh, Monica, Monica!" and his voice ended in a wail.

She came close to him and stood for a moment looking up into his eyes, but it was almost too dark for her to see them.

"Kiss me, Harry," she said at length in a whisper.

And in an ecstasy of passion he caught her in his arms, and their lips met in one long and silent embrace.

"And now, farewell, Harry," and he knew by her voice that she was weeping.

"Farewell, Monica," and he watched her glide away in the darkness and vanish.

For several minutes he stood staring into the empty night; then he turned and strode rapidly home.

Robert Morton was waiting for him with a look of anxious expectation on his face.

"Did he say anything about the money, Harry?"

"Not a word, father."

Robert's head drooped, but he said no more. Taking up a book he had been reading, he walked to his easy-chair and sat down.

So ended a day that was herald of a painful tomorrow. Yet no one guessed what the new day would bring. Coming events did not cast their shadows before,

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUR OF TEMPTATION.

ROBERT MORTON got up early the next morning, as was his custom, and, after sunning himself for some time in the garden, went to meet the postman, whom he saw coming along the lane. He was still worrying himself about his creditors, the result of being worried by them.

"I have only one letter for you to-day, Mr. Morton," the postman said, with a good-humoured smile, and he pulled the letter out of his bundle, handed it to the schoolmaster, and passed on.

"Thanks," Robert replied, with a poor attempt to return the postman's smile, and he went and leaned against the gate and tore open the envelope.

He read the letter slowly with a clouded face, read it a second time, with a still deeper frown; then, crumpling it in his hand, he leaned his elbows on the gate and looked across the field, where several cows were standing in the lush grass waiting to be milked.

He saw nothing, however; one sentence in the letter he had just read was slowly burning its way into his brain.

"If this account is not settled within forty-eight hours of date hereof legal action will be at once taken."

It is usually the man who owes only a small

amount that is troubled about it. Large liabilities appear generally to sit very lightly. A cotter, who owes ten pounds, and has only eight to pay it with, is in purgatory. But the lordling or company promoter, who owes ten thousand and has nothing at all, lives up to the measure of his liability and eats, drinks, and is merry.

Robert Morton owed a hundred and fifteen pounds altogether, and for any ability to pay he might just as well have owed a hundred and fifteen thousand. He had not twenty pounds of available cash in the world. Legal action meant being sold up. That to a man in his position meant loss of everything—loss of home, loss of self-respect, loss of position, loss of reputation.

Being a pessimistic soul he naturally looked on the darkest side of the picture. He saw himself drifting down and down in the social scale, sinking lower and lower, year by year, getting shabbier and shabbier, from sheer inability to dress respectably; becoming, perhaps—who could tell?—a sandwich-man and dying at last in a casual ward.

There had been such cases—hundreds of them, deserving people, too—men who tried to be honest and found that it led them down into the gutter.

Robert's heart grew bitter as he pictured the possibilities of the future. Faith he had none, nor was his moral fibre of the toughest kind. He had been honest hitherto, not from any overmastering moral impulse, but because he believed that in the main honesty was the best policy. He would have argued that no man should play the rogue unless he were morally certain of not being found out.

At heart he was an opportunist. He was what he was because he had never had a chance of being anything else. But all this talk about truth for its own sake, and honesty for the sake of honesty, he had no sympathy with.

He cherished no high moral ideals; why should he? Ideals were all right enough to prate about on the platform, but in the stress and humdrum of life they were in the way. Besides, he believed that nearly every man had his price. There might be an exception here and there, but they were very few. The main difference between the man in prison and the man out was that the one had been found out and the other hadn't.

The question for him, however, was, What was to be done? He couldn't steal. There was no opportunity for successful theft in Graystone. He could not remain inactive, for if he did in a week or two at the outside he would be houseless and homeless. He could not borrow. Even money-lenders would hesitate to advance him a hundred and fifteen pounds, and even if they would he had sense enough to see that it would be a case of out of the frying-pan into the fire. Should he beg?

Lord Menheniot had encouraged him to run into debt; nay, he had done more, he had promised him pecuniary aid. Why not go to him and put the case plainly before him? He had waited and waited, hoping that Lord Menheniot would remember his promise without any reminder from him. But he had not remembered; apparently he had allowed the matter to slip completely out of his mind.

It was a delicate thing to do, no doubt. He

shrank from the task with a feeling that amounted almost to dread, for Robert Morton was a proud man—poor men usually are. But extreme cases require extreme treatment. It was the only course open to him. The Earl might resent his appeal, of course; most likely he would. There were few things that even rich people objected to so much as being asked for money.

Robert Morton tightened his fingers over the crumpled letter.

“I must do it,” he said to himself, with emphasis, “and I must do it at once. And if it fails—well, then the deluge,” and he smiled sardonically.

A few minutes later the sound of horse’s hoofs fell on his ears. “Who comes galloping here, I wonder?” he said, turning his head quickly. “Some one in a great hurry evidently.”

Robert left the gate and looked along the road. Nearer and nearer came the horse and rider.

“Why, it is Sam,” Robert said to himself; “I wonder what’s up at the Hall.”

The groom, seeing the schoolmaster, pulled up.

“I say, Mr. Morton,” he called, “you’d better go up to the house. The governor’s had a fit or some’at of the kind. I’m off for the doctor.”

“You mean Lord Menheniot?”

“In course I do. Who else should I mean? I tell thee he’s been tuck with a stroke, and it’s a bad case, too,” and digging his heels into his horse he galloped away.

Robert stood staring after him in open-eyed misery and amazement. Had there been an earthquake he could not have felt more alarmed or dismayed. The

last blow had been struck. The absolutely worst had come. In his most despairing moments there had always been a lingering hope that Lord Menheniot would not let him sink, especially since the debts had been incurred on Harry's account, but now even that hope was taken away.

He could not go and worry a sick man about money, and before he got well again, if ever he did get well, the avalanche would have fallen.

He turned back at length and entered his house. The others were just sitting down to breakfast, and were wondering what had become of him.

His white anguished face told them in a moment that something had happened.

"Are you not well, father?" Madge asked.

"Yes, I am as well as usual," he answered in dolorous tones, "but I have just heard that the Earl has been taken suddenly ill. Had a stroke or a fit or something of the kind. Did you not see Sam riding past?"

"No."

"Well, he's gone off for the doctor. He pulled up to tell me. I'll not stay to breakfast. He thinks I may be of some use at the Hall. If I don't turn up in time for school, Harry, you go down and take my place."

"All right, father."

"I hope it is not so bad as Sam thinks," and Robert hurried away.

At the Hall he was shown as usual into the study.

"I will tell Miss Monica" (they never called her Miss Stuart), the servant said, "that you are here."

I have no doubt she will see you as soon as possible," and closed the door behind him.

A few moments later Monica came noiselessly into the room. She was very pale, and her eyes looked as if she had been weeping, but she was quite calm and collected.

"It is very good of you to come, Mr. Morton," she said, shaking hands with him. "Will you stay a while—at least till the doctor comes? It will be a comfort to feel that there is someone besides the servants in the house."

"I will stay as long as you wish," he said, warmly, "and if there is anything I can do I shall be only too glad to do it."

"It is very kind of you. I really do not know what is needed yet. We have only just succeeded in getting him into bed. It has been a difficult task."

"Where was he taken and how?" Robert asked, sympathetically.

"He was in this room, Mr. Morton. I believe he was sitting at his desk writing letters. Perkins was passing and heard a noise and a groan as though a great weight had fallen, and being alarmed he knocked at the door, and getting no response he opened it, and entered and found him lying on the floor like one dead; and, indeed, we all thought he was dead at first."

"And has he recovered consciousness?"

"No, Mr. Morton, he has scarcely even spoken since."

Then a knock came to the door and a voice whispered, "The doctor, Miss Monica."

"Excuse me for a while, Mr. Morton," she said,

with a pathetic smile. "I will come back as soon as I can and let you know what the doctor thinks."

Robert felt too restless to remain still, so he began to pace up and down the room. At length he paused before the desk. It was partially open, and well within sight was the Earl's cheque-book.

A cold sweat broke out all over him and a mist came up before his eyes. He felt for a moment as though he were going to faint, and staggering to a chair, he sat down.

The faintness passed away after a few moments, but his hands trembled as though he had been smitten with palsy. He knew that the supreme moment of his life had come—a moment that would tax him to the utmost, and decide for good or ill all the unexplored future.

It was a chance in ten thousand, an opportunity that never came to a man twice in a lifetime. It had come also at the supreme moment, and if he missed it or flung it away he would deserve never to have another stroke of luck to the end of his days. So he said to himself. He took a step towards the desk and reached out his hand. To tear out a blank cheque, counterfoil and all, would be the easiest thing in the world. To copy Lord Menheniot's signature would not be much more difficult. His skill in penmanship was one of his greatest gifts. He had copied the Earl's signature scores of times for the mere fun of it. The big sprawling "M" at the beginning, the clumsy "h" in the middle, and the final flourish with the "t" at the end were all as familiar to him as his own signature. Yes, he could do it without the least difficulty, and he would. It

was his last chance. It was a spar flung to him in a raging surf. If he did not seize it he would sink and perish.

But before his hand could reach the book something seemed to whisper, "You have lived honestly till now, be faithful to the end," and once more the mist came up before his eyes and the faintness came over him, and staggering back to the chair he sat down again.

Conscience was not dead yet. His moral sense was more alert than he knew. He fancied that he had shed all his religious beliefs as a tree sheds its leaves in winter, and that he had long since reasoned conscience out of existence. Now in a moment all the spectres of an early belief started up in front of him; a thousand memories of an earlier and happier time came trooping back.

"What slaves we all are," he said to himself impatiently, when he had steadied himself a little. "How our habits bind us in spite of everything, and the fears of our childhood follow us into mature life. But am I to be ruled by a fad, a superstition, a bit of priestly quackery? Never."

And he started to his feet again; then a step in the hall arrested him and a cold sweat broke out over him once more. He sat down a third time and the step passed on.

"I'm worse than a baby," he muttered under his breath. "Ah, but I understand, I've had no breakfast, that's the reason I feel so faint," and he wiped his damp forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. "Conscience, after all, is a question of food, or want of it."

But he was unable to blind his moral vision by any dust-throwing. Faith is not of reason. Its roots lie deeper. Religion is not a matter of education, it is an instinct. Robert Morton imagined that it was something that might be put on or taken off as we don or discard a garment. But in the hour of moral peril he discovered his mistake. It was of the very stuff out of which his life had been woven.

So, finding his moral sense could not be strangled, he began to reason with it.

"I have a right to the money," he said to himself; "he promised to meet any liabilities incurred on Harry's account, and as now he is unable to draw the cheque himself, what wrong can there be in my doing it for him?"

"But it would be forgery," something within him urged, "and might be discovered."

"If the Earl dies, that is practically impossible. Who is to find it out?"

"But he may get better."

"And if he does, the chances are he will never discover it. But if the worst should come to the worst, I can see clearly enough how I can escape."

"But somebody else would have to suffer, very likely."

"I can't help that. It is the way of the world. If one man gains, the other loses. Gain in nearly everything is built on loss somewhere. If I buy cheap, someone sells at a loss. What is good for me is disaster for him. That can't be helped, we must all take our chance; there's no good without

its compensating evil. Fortunes on the Stock Exchange mean misfortune to crowds of nameless people. The wealth of publicans and brewers is won —ah, I'm wasting time," and he sprang to his feet again. He came close to the desk and listened, no one was stirring outside. He stole on tip-toe to the door and opened it slightly, then wider. He stepped out into the hall. The house might have been deserted, no one was about.

He came back and closed the door, then walked to the window; no one was on the outside. He was feeling very strange and nerveless. It was a new part to play, and in spite of his sophistry he shrank from it. Theft and forgery were ugly words. Had he not lowered himself and weakened himself even by the contemplation of such a crime? and he had always borne a blameless reputation.

He turned away from the window and approached the desk again. All the faintness had passed away, his brain was working swiftly.

"And if I don't," he muttered to himself, "in two days the bailiffs will be in the house and I shall be sold up, shall lose my situation, shall be sent adrift upon the world, shall sink down into poverty and want, perhaps to vulgar crime and a shameful end," and he shuddered.

"This business is risky, I know," he went on, "and in the eye of the law is considered a big offence. But it is no worse than a gamble on the Stock Exchange, nor yet so bad. I'll do it and take my chance. The result can be no worse than if I don't. It's a speculation, and I must risk it. He reached out his hand and drew forth the cheque-

book. The last leaf would come out easily. He began to tear it.

Good heavens! was that a step? No, he was safe yet. "Tearing a leaf out is not forgery," he muttered to himself. Now the leaf was clean out and left no sign of being removed.

He quickly returned the cheque-book to its place, and then stole back to his chair. The cold perspiration stood in great beads upon his forehead, his lips were ashen.

He folded the cheque carefully across the centre and placed it in his pocket-book; then he drew out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead again.

An awful sense of guilt and shame stole over him. He doubted if he were awake; it all seemed like some horrid dream. He raised his fingers to his eyes and rubbed them, then stared out of the window. There was no doubt about his being awake, no doubt about his having taken the first step on the road to a great crime.

"But I have not forged the Earl's name yet," he reflected, while a ghastly smile stole over his face.

The next moment the door opened and Monica came into the room.

"The doctor gives no hope at all," she said; "he thinks he will never recover consciousness again."

CHAPTER VI.

CROSSING THE RUBICON.

THE vicar arrived at the Hall close on the heels of the schoolmaster, and went at once to the sick-room. He asked no one's permission. Why should he? He was the sick man's nearest relative and heir to the Graystone estate. Moreover, he was his spiritual adviser. Hence his proper place was by the stricken man's side. Poor Lady Menheniot could not be considered.

Fortunately, perhaps, Lord Menheniot was unconscious, and so did not see the peculiar look of triumph in his relative's eyes. The vicar tried to look distressed. He blew his nose violently several times. He had great difficulty in reading the prayers suitable to the occasion, so overcome was he with emotion. But all the while there crept into his heart little thrills of exultation. He could not forget that he was next-of-kin, and that in case the Earl died Graystone would be his; that he would be equal to the bishop; that he would have a seat in the House of Lords; that he would be "The Rev. the Earl of Menheniot," and that, almost for the first time in his life, he would be in easy financial circumstances.

It is not surprising, therefore, that his eyes should betray his triumph, and that a certain air of import-

ance should steal into his manner that no one had ever noticed before.

Many people foolishly assume that a clergyman ought to feel differently, and think differently, and act differently from other men. That when he exchanges check for broadcloth, a bowler for a wide-awake, and a coloured scarf for a white necktie, that he ought to change at the same time his nature and temperament and disposition ; and, indeed, not a few people appear to be under the delusion that he does so, that in becoming a clergyman he ceases to be a man, and that consequently he is not swayed and governed by the motives and passions that move other men.

Such people are always horribly shocked when the hour of disillusionment comes. It is such a painful disappointment to them to discover that their golden image has feet of clay, and frequently a heart of clay also, and yet the fault is not entirely theirs. The power and influence of nearly all priesthoods have been based on the assumption that the priests belonged to a different caste, that they had been created in some occult way a superior order. And the priests themselves in all ages have done their best to keep the superstition alive. When the superstition dies, the women of the world will have demonstrated their equality with men.

The Rev. Melville Grant was a fair average type of Englishman. He was energetic even to fussiness, zealous to the verge of bigotry, and so loyal to his own Church that charity towards others had not much room to grow and flourish.

He had been so poor all his life that money had an exaggerated value in his eyes, and so closely related to the aristocracy that he regarded the democracy as the residuum—an inferior breed, a necessary evil. He was not a bad-hearted man, nor unreasonably selfish—perhaps no more selfish than you or I, dear reader. It would be easy, of course, to point out faults in his character. Let him who is without fault undertake the task.

Robert Morton was on the point of leaving when the vicar came suddenly into the room. There was an air of authority in his manner already. He was quickly feeling his way to the dignity of his position. He looked at the schoolmaster and frowned, then bowed in his most frigid manner.

“I am afraid, my dear,” he said, turning to Monica, “that it is nearly all over with your guardian. The doctor thinks he cannot live many hours; but we have wired for a London specialist. Everything must be done that can be done.”

Monica bowed her head in reply, and then stole quickly out of the room.

The vicar’s sympathetic manner departed directly the door closed. He had never liked Robert Morton. He knew that at heart he was an unbeliever, that he came to church only because he was compelled to do so, and played the hypocrite merely to keep his situation. Had he given himself time to think about the matter he might have discovered that Robert Morton was not a solitary example, that there were hundreds of schoolmasters in the country forced into the same false and hateful position, that attendance at the parish church was a *sine qua non*, and that any hint

of dislike or dissent would jeopardise their bread and cheese.

To play the hypocrite one day a week is a kind of life assurance premium they have to pay. It may mean a certain loss of dignity and moral tone. But life is more than dignity, and moral tone counts for little in the modern struggle for existence.

The vicar faced the schoolmaster directly Monica left.

"I fear this will make a great difference to your position," he said, and his voice was hard and cold.

Robert Morton was quick to detect the tone and resent it.

"I believe the Earl is not dead yet," he replied.

The vicar winced, and his face became scarlet.

"I consider that a most insolent remark," he replied.

"Indeed. I fail to see where the insolence comes in."

"That is where people of your class always fail," was the cutting reply. "It takes several generations to evolve a gentleman."

"Indeed; then I fear there is not much hope for your son."

The vicar stared at him aghast, while his eyes blazed with passion. He made an effort to speak, but his anger choked his utterance. Never before had he been so insulted.

Fortunately his dignity at length came to his rescue. He remembered where he was; he remembered, too, that he began the quarrel. Nevertheless a prospective Earl, even though he was a

clergyman, could not be expected to bear insult in silence.

"I think, Mr. Robert Morton," he said, at length, with slow and pointed emphasis, "that the less you and I see of each other the better it will be. You quite understand that you and I never had, and never can have, anything in common, and in case Lord Menheniot's illness should prove fatal, you might do worse than bear the fact in mind. In fact, it might be to our mutual advantage if you and your brutal and pugilistic son could find situations somewhere else."

"My brutal and pugilistic son," said Robert, glaring at him. "Pray what do you mean?"

"Is it possible that you have not heard what took place yesterday afternoon?"

"I have heard nothing."

"Then let me tell you that, because my son attempted to rescue Miss Stuart from his objectionable attentions, he turned upon him—that is, upon my son—like an infuriated tiger, and so, catching him unawares, battered him in a most shameful fashion."

Robert Morton smiled. "Harry is not of the quarrelsome sort," he answered, "and I am glad to hear that he has been able to give a good account of himself."

"You are glad?" the vicar questioned, aghast.

"Yes, I am glad. I have no doubt your son began the quarrel yesterday, as you have begun it to-day. You think that because our social position is inferior to yours we must meekly pocket every insult that you choose to fling at us."

The vicar had quite recovered himself by this time, and with a pitying smile and a lofty toss of the head, he walked out of the room.

Robert returned to his home in a curiously agitated condition. Mentally and morally he felt adrift on an open sea. He had not only lost his moorings, but he had lost his bearings.

"I've played the fool with the vicar, that's a dead certainty," he said to himself; "I might as well have kept silent. I've done no good by angering him, and I've made him my open and avowed enemy. If the Earl dies he'll shift me, and that pretty quickly."

Then his thoughts returned again to the blank cheque in his pocket-book. But he felt curiously, like a man in a dream; nothing seemed real to him. He was being hurried to and fro by forces over which he had no control. His will-power had seemingly all evaporated. He hardly knew if he were himself or some other man.

The stress and shock of circumstances had for the moment completely unhinged him. The threat of his creditors, the sudden illness of the Earl, the tempting cheque-book, the altercation with the vicar, the uncertain tenure of his livelihood—all impelled him in the same direction.

The only thing that seemed clear to him was that he was standing on the brink of ruin, with only one possible chance of escape. Of course that might mean ruin also, but there was strong probability that it might not. If what he proposed was evil, well, he was doing evil that good might come. But he was neither in the mental nor the moral con-

dition to distinguish clearly what was evil and what was not. As we said before, he was completely adrift.

It was in this mood he entered his house. Bob had gone to school with Harry, Madge had gone to a distant farmhouse to give music lessons, Dora and her mother were in the kitchen.

Mrs. Morton came out at the sound of her husband's footsteps, wiping her hands.

"Is the Earl any better?" she asked, anxiously.

"No; he has never recovered consciousness. The doctor thinks he cannot last many hours."

She sat down suddenly, and looked with a pained expression out of the window. She saw in a moment what the death of the Earl might mean to them.

"Still, it might be worse," he went on, with an attempted cheerfulness. "The presence of Harry last evening appears to have reminded him of his promise."

"And you have——"

"Don't breathe a syllable," he interrupted, "to any living soul—not a syllable. The vicar is assuming proprietorship already. I know you can keep your mouth shut."

"I think so," she answered, with a wan smile, and she rose and returned to the kitchen.

Robert retired to the little parlour, which he used mainly as his study.

He had taken another step, and every step made retreat more difficult. He sat down at his desk and pulled out his pocket-book with the blank cheque. For a long time he looked at it as if undecided what to do.

But the devil kept hounding him on, and he had not strength to resist. No man with impunity can play fast and loose with his convictions. To make light of honour and righteousness even in thought bears its penalty in moral deterioration. Robert Morton had been for years losing his moorings, and now in the storm he was helpless. Had the temptation never come to him he might have walked in outward honesty to the end of the chapter. But is not that true of all of us? We are honest till we are tempted beyond our strength.

Harry looked up eagerly when he saw Robert enter the school.

"Is the Earl better?" He asked in an undertone.

"No; he is not expected to live the day out."

"It will make a difference to us," he said absently, and he thought of Monica while he spoke.

"Yes, it will make a great difference," Robert answered; "but I am glad to say he remembered his promise after you left him last night, and handsomely, too."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; he left his cheque on the desk for me. He might have known something was going to happen."

Robert was quite glib with his story. He was surprised to find with what ease he lied. But lying is always easy to the man who surrenders his honour, just as lying is always necessary in such a case. It matters not what wrong a man commits, he will have to lie before the day is out in order to hide it. Lying is the poor and pervious refuge of all evil-doers.

Robert took out his pocket-book and showed the cheque to Harry.

The latter glanced at it for a moment and raised his eyebrows. "But how do you know it is for you?" he asked. "It is simply payable to bearer."

"The envelope was addressed to me," Robert answered in a moment.

"It is a very handsome amount," Harry said, looking grave; "but I had rather we did not use it."

"That may be," Robert answered, mildly; "but look at this," and he handed him the crumpled letter that he had received that morning.

Harry gave a low whistle and looked thoughtful. "I did not know things were as bad as that," he said, after a pause.

"I have given you pretty broad hints more than once," Robert answered with a melancholy smile; "but I suppose it is of the nature of youth to think lightly of difficulties."

"Of some difficulties, perhaps," Harry answered gloomily, and he thought again of Monica.

"Now," said Robert, "I want you to go up to town by the next train. You will get to King's Cross by one o'clock, so that you will have plenty of time before the bank closes. However, go direct to the bank and get the cheque cashed, and then run round and settle all the accounts; you can be back again by tea-time easily if you like."

"I would much rather you did this matter yourself," Harry said, uneasily. "The cashier at the bank will think I've stolen the cheque."

"He'll think nothing of the kind," Robert said hastily. "Do you think the men who are passing

thousands through their hands every day will think twice about such a paltry amount as this?"

"To me £250 seems a very large sum."

Robert smiled again. He had grown quite cheerful. "I would go myself," he said, "only I may be wanted at the Hall. Miss Monica said it was quite a relief to her to have me near."

"Is she very much distressed?" Harry asked quickly.

"I think so. Her eyes looked very troubled, but she is quite calm and self-possessed. How quickly she has grown into a woman! It seems only yesterday that she was a mere child. But you had better be getting ready, Harry, or you will miss the train."

Harry did not raise any further objection. Apart from having to cash the cheque he would enjoy a day in London. Graystone was a sleepy little village at best, and would be perfectly intolerable without a sight of Monica now and then. The beauty of London was, it was never sleepy. Wet or dry, summer or winter, it was always alert, active, open-eyed.

He had no thought of danger. That the man he called his father was deliberately laying a snare for him never came within the circle of his imagination. He walked with a light heart to the station through the summer sunshine, humming an old love song as he went.

CHAPTER VII.

TO LONDON TOWN.

“SKIN for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life,” so the devil is reported to have said on an historic occasion. Whether the remark was original or only a quotation we are not told. In the absence of quotation marks, however, and in view of the fact that his Satanic Majesty has been frequently represented as more or less of a philosopher, we may give him credit for this particular fragment of Scripture. Also it may be noted that on occasion even the devil may speak the truth, for truth it undoubtedly is.

It is a little disconcerting to discover how selfish and cowardly, and even cruel, men become directly their personal safety is threatened. How often when a vessel has been sinking have strong men thrust defenceless women and children aside in their struggle to reach the boat. The average man places his own life above everything, and in the presence of overwhelming danger forgets everything but his own safety. Men have trampled their dearest friends to death in trying to escape from a burning building.

Robert Morton was not a cruel man in the ordinary acceptance of the word. He believed that Harry would run but an infinitesimal risk in cashing

the cheque; that there was a slight risk he saw from the first, and in order to screen himself in case of accident he sent Harry on the errand.

He would deeply grieve, of course, if his scheme should fail, for he was fond of his nephew, and had even made sacrifices for his advancement; but he was fonder of himself. He would give Harry's skin in preference to his own.

Harry was not unsociable, but, like most Englishmen when travelling by rail, he preferred his own company to that of any one else. Finding himself in an empty compartment, he secretly rejoiced, and sincerely hoped that no one would come to disturb his meditations during the journey. For the first few minutes he employed himself in scanning the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, which was the only paper to be purchased at the tiny bookstall. But he quickly grew tired of this, and, lighting a cigarette, he pushed his head back into a corner of the compartment and gave himself up to day-dreams.

It was pleasant to watch the blue wreaths of smoke curling above his head, and to notice how the face of Monica came and went, now smiling at him brightly, now shyly turning away from him, now vanishing for a moment, only to come back again.

Since his meeting with her the evening before in the dim twilight she had scarcely been out of his thoughts, for even in his dreams she was never absent; while the memory of that kiss filled him with unspeakable ecstasy, and he believed would remain with him to the last moment of his life. He believed it meant more than a girlish fancy, something deeper than mere friendship.

Of course, had she been less a child of nature and more a woman of the world; had she lived in the whirl of London society instead of in the quiet of Graystone; had she mixed with her equals instead of running wild with him in the park and lanes, she would not have revealed her heart so freely; but just because she was unspoiled by the world, and simple and ingenuous as youth should always be, she had given him freely a glimpse of the truth, and he believed that, but for the deep gulf of caste, he might win her hand without difficulty.

But young as she was, it was clear from her simple farewell that she recognised the inevitableness of the barrier that divided them. The kiss was not merely a token of affection, it was also the symbol of farewell. In the future they would go their separate ways; now and then, perhaps, they would cross each other's path, but they would meet and part merely as strangers. The old happy intercourse was at an end for ever.

But youth, generally speaking, finds it difficult to believe that anything is inevitable; and Harry, in spite of his logic, found himself dreaming dreams and building castles, in all of which Monica had a place.

He picked up his newspaper and began to read a brief obituary notice of a great man who had just died. The story of his life was very simple and yet wonderfully romantic. He had begun as a poor boy in a London slum, and had gradually worked his way step by step until he reached, not merely wealth, but honour and renown, and had left behind him a name that would be remembered in history for generations to come.

Harry read the brief story with a kind of fascination. It had a lesson for him and a message. It breathed into his heart a new hope. What might not he accomplish if he tried? The world was before him as it was before others. There was always a chance even for the humblest. Knowledge unfolded her ample page to the gaze of the poorest lad; the highest walks of life were not barred to any, and if others through toil and struggle had won their way to renown why might not he? And if he could win a position of honour then even Monica would come within his reach.

He began to run over the names of the Q.C.'s who occupied high positions in the social and political world, and he discovered that not a few of them were the sons of humble parents, but they had worked hard and patiently, had bided their time, had taken the tide at the flood and had been carried on to fortune.

"What is there to hinder my doing the same?" he said to himself, and he closed his eyes and smiled.

The train was bearing him on through lovely scenery; the fields were swept with living green, the woods were glorious in their summer dress, while the sunshine flooded the land and glorified everything. But he did not notice the scenery; a mental picture was before him more beautiful than anything that Nature could offer.

It was not until the train ran through Barnet that Harry awoke from his dreams. The atmosphere of London began to affect him even at this stage—London, the metropolis of the world. Its very name moved him strangely.

On reaching King's Cross he made his way along the underground passage to the Metropolitan station, and purchased a ticket for Moorgate Street. He hated the smoky "Underground" journey, but it was the quickest way to his destination; it was also inexpensive, and that was a prime consideration. When he got out at Moorgate Street, he hurried as rapidly as possible in the direction of the bank, and in a few minutes felt the throb of London life all about him.

It was not necessary that he should go to the corner of Princes Street, but he loved to see the crowd in front of the Exchange. There was something exhilarating in the bewildering kaleidoscope of cabs and 'buses and waggons and lorries, seemingly mixed up in inextricable confusion. There was no other part of London that moved him so deeply, no other place in the world, perhaps, where the tide of human life surged as it did at that point. It gave to him a sense of exhilaration, he felt as though he were being braced up by a strong north wind.

He did not remain many minutes, however; he was anxious to get to the bank and have the cheque cashed. It happened to be the busiest time of the day. The counter was so thronged that he had to wait his turn before he could get near it; the cashiers were so busy that they had no time to notice him. Money was being taken in and given out with a rapidity that almost amazed him. Sovereigns were scooped out into scales, and weighed, and handed over to mere youths, who packed them into bags, and hurried away into the busy streets. It

was all new to him and intensely fascinating. It gave to him a fresh idea of the greatness of England's commercial life. What was being done in one bank was being done in a hundred others at that moment. What wealth there was in this great city! How the notes passed and repassed, representing untold thousands. His small cheque, indeed, seemed as a drop in the bucket, and scarcely that.

He caught a glimpse of one bank-note for £1,000 : it was the first time he had ever seen a note for that amount, and he looked at it with a species of wonder. It would be something to talk about to Dora and Madge when he got home.

The cashier took the cheque and scrutinised it carefully, then looked up and as carefully scrutinised him. It seemed, however, to be quite in order. For a moment he disappeared behind a partition; then he came back again and asked how he would take the money.

"In £5 notes, if you please," Harry replied.

Instantly a bundle of fresh, clean, unused Bank of England notes were lifted from a drawer and the amount carefully counted, turned over and counted a second time, each note being given a little jerk as it was turned over. Harry watched with intense curiosity the operation; it was so swift, so deft, so neatly and carefully done that he wondered how long the young man behind the counter had been practising that kind of thing before he had reached such perfection.

A moment later the fifty crisp, clean notes were handed to him. Folding them carefully he put them into his pocket-book, and let the elastic strap tighten

round them. This he placed in the inner pocket of his coat, buttoned it over his chest, and with a sigh of relief went out again into the crowded street, and was soon lost in the multitude surging round him.

His next business was to hunt up his father's creditors, and so get rid of some of his cash. First in Fleet Street, then in Chancery Lane, then into Lincoln's Inn Fields, then back into the Strand, and finally into Piccadilly—five creditors in all.

In front of the Mansion House he climbed on to a 'bus going westward. From the Bank to Chancery Lane for a penny, it was surely the cheapest ride in the world and the most exhilarating. He managed to get a front seat, and watched, not without admiration, the driver's skill and even temerity. Now and then he almost held his breath, and wondered that the driver did not pull up or put on the brake. He held the rail tight in readiness for a collision; he expected every moment that the wheels would get locked with the wheels of some other vehicle, but somehow they seemed to escape even though it was but by a hair's breadth.

At length St. Paul's came into sight with its grey-stained walls, its dark and massive dome, and its golden cross, high above the smoke, gleaming in the sunshine. The Londoners did not notice it; they saw it so often that it failed any longer to impress them; familiarity had bred contempt. But he, fresh from the country, gazed at it with reverent wonder and admiration. It was so colossal, so symmetrical, so noble in its proportions, so high and lifted up above all the surrounding buildings, so splendid in its conception as well as in its execution

that it held him with a spell. He was sorry that the 'bus hurried him on, for he would fain have looked upon it a longer time and drunk in more of the spirit it inspired.

He found his father's creditors exceedingly agreeable and polite. When they discovered that the account was to be settled in full they beamed with smiles in a moment. One or two even apologised for the strong letters they had sent out; of course, they explained, business was business, and as they had large obligations to meet they expected their debtors would pay their bills as soon as they were due. But to show that they had no ill-feeling, and to prove that they had perfect faith in Mr. Morton's honesty and even capability of paying, they were quite prepared to grant further credit if required.

Harry explained that he was not commissioned to enter into any fresh obligations; he was simply sent by his father to pay the bill, and very thankful he was when the last creditor had been seen and the last account settled.

By this time he began to feel very hungry, so he betook himself to Gatti's Restaurant in the Strand, where he enjoyed what he called a square meal to the full. After his lunch he spent an hour in the National Gallery and another hour in looking at the shop windows, which on the whole he enjoyed more than looking at the works of the old masters; then he made his way again to King's Cross and took the train back to Graystone.

He found on his arrival his father waiting for him at the station. He had an anxious, worried look on his face, which quickly vanished, however, on catch-

ing sight of Harry's cheerful countenance. He saw by the look in his son's eyes that his mission had been successful, and judged that no questions had been asked.

"Well, Harry," he said, "you managed it all right, I hope?"

"Yes, father," was the reply; "I had no difficulty at all."

"They made no bones at the bank about cashing the cheque, I suppose?"

"None in the least; they scrutinised it somewhat carefully and then scrutinised me, but they asked no questions," was the reply.

"I expected as much," Robert answered; "of course it would have been more satisfactory if Lord Menheniot had made it out in my name instead of making it payable to bearer. However, since they raised no question at the bank, we need not concern ourselves."

"I think they were too busy to raise any questions," Harry, said, with a laugh; "the place was literally thronged. I had to wait my turn before I could get to the counter; I never realised before what money there is in London."

"Aye, it is a sight to go into one of those London banks," Robert answered.

"My little cheque seemed as nothing," Harry said, "though I confess I have not felt quite comfortable carrying so much money in my pocket."

For a while they walked on in silence; then Robert said, "You need not say anything to the girls, Harry, about your trip to London to-day—I mean the object of it."

"I don't see why," Harry said, questioningly.

"Well, it is this way. I have never told them of the straits in which I found myself, so it is not necessary that they should know either about my financial difficulties or the way in which the Earl has helped me out of them."

"As you will," Harry said; "I assure you I am not eager to talk about the matter."

"You have the balance of the cheque with you, of course?"

"Yes, I have it in bank-notes in my pocket. Shall I give it you now?"

"No, perhaps you had better wait until we get home."

After tea the two men retired to the little parlour, when Harry counted out the £135 that he had brought with him. Robert fingered the new crisp notes eagerly and with a strange look of triumph in his eyes.

"You deserve something for your trouble, Harry," he said; "if you would like to have one of these notes you are quite welcome."

"I would prefer to have none of the money," Harry answered; "I have just a little spare cash that will do for my present wants."

"As you will, as you will," Robert answered, with a sigh of relief; he seemed loth to reduce the amount by the smallest fraction. Long after Harry had left him he sat gloating over the little heap of notes as a miser might. To him they presented unmeasured possibilities. He had been building castles and dreaming dreams all day. In view of the possibility of getting the money he had wired to an old

school-fellow, who was an outside broker in the City, as to the best way of investing a few pounds that had come into his possession, and in reply he got a wire, "Buy Bonsons."

Robert, however, did not know what "Bonsons" meant, so he hurried away to the newsagent and got a London paper and began to read carefully the money market intelligence and the share list. He discovered that "Bonsons" referred to some South African mines that at present were worth almost nothing. The pound shares, in fact, had gone down to two and sixpence, and, from what the brief mining report said, might go even lower than that.

This to Robert did not look very encouraging, so he wired to his friend to write him particulars by that evening's post, so that he might hear first thing in the morning. He had great faith, however, in his friend's business capacity, and felt sure that he would not advise him so peremptorily to purchase "Bonsons" unless there was money in it.

Of course it was a speculation, he knew; but in these days a man had to speculate if he was to win.

Meanwhile, Harry and the other members of the family were discussing the chances of the Earl's recovery. Up to the present he had not recovered consciousness, and the local doctor was still without hope. But the specialist from London had not yet given his report. All the Mortons, except Robert, hoped that the Earl would recover. Robert, of course, was anxious that he should die. If he recovered his reason again and was able to transact business, he would be certain to find out that a cheque had been abstracted from his cheque-book,

and forged for £250. The very fact that it was made payable to bearer would awaken the Earl's suspicion; moreover, the bank returned all cheques after they had been cashed, hence it would be impossible that this cheque would escape Lord Menheniot's eye, and if this should happen, of course the forgery would be discovered and the blame would at once fall upon Harry.

There was, however, no prospect of his recovery yet, and Robert's mind was quite easy on the question. He was so engrossed with the idea of making a fortune on the Stock Exchange out of his small beginnings that other matters had not much chance of securing a place in his thoughts.

On the following morning he was up early, as usual, and walked along the lane towards the village, in order to intercept the postman. As he expected, he found a long letter from his friend George Fletcher, who entered into all particulars respecting the "Bonsons Mine."

There was every possibility, he said, that there would be an immediate boom in these shares, and it was not unlikely that they might run as high as £5 per share, in which case those who purchased now would reap a very handsome harvest.

The prospect, of course, was a very inviting one, but he knew at the same time that the risk was great, and the question in his mind was, should he take the risk? The possession of £130 was in itself a mere nothing. If he invested it at the ordinary rate of interest it would bring him in such an infinitesimal amount that he would scarcely be any the better for it. As the nucleus for speculation

on the Stock Exchange, it might of course turn out to be a trump card.

"If I lose, I lose," he said to himself, "and I shall be no worse off in the end, but if I win then there may be a fortune, and I want to be independent of this teaching business, for when the Earl is gone I may pack up my traps and depart from this place as quickly as possible." He was a little disconcerted half-an-hour later to hear that the Earl was decidedly better, and that the London specialist held out a hope, a faint one, it is true, that he might ultimately recover.

The groom who brought the news said that "there had been a confusion of blood in the Earl's brain, but there was a chance that he might become dissipated, and that if he did become dissipated—which was not at all likely, since the Earl was an exceedingly sober man, then he might recover; unless, however, he did give way to dissipation there was no chance for him."

Harry laughed outright at this exceedingly lucid explanation of the case; but Robert looked painfully grave and solemn.

For himself he had no fear. If the worst came to the worst, suspicion would not light upon him. He had so arranged matters that Harry would become the scapegoat. Of course it would place him in a very awkward position. Harry would know the truth, and would lose all respect for him. The part that he would have to play would be increasingly difficult, but having started there was no turning back. Whatever the consequences might be, it would have to be carried through. He would be

sorry, of course, that Harry should suffer. He saw how that one sin would lead to another, that lying would be followed by treachery, and by unutterable meanness. That was a part of the price he would have to pay if—the Earl got better.

“I’m a fool to worry myself,” he muttered, at length, “he isn’t better yet.” Nevertheless, when he sat down to breakfast he found that the news had taken away all his appetite.

CHAPTER VIII.

WEAVING THE MESH.

ROBERT MORTON developed—or deteriorated—rapidly. Within a month he hardly recognised himself. He flung away his old beliefs with an ease and rapidity that were an astonishment to him. For forty years and more he had been a fool, so he said, now his eyes had been suddenly opened, and as a consequence life was a pleasanter thing, and he was a happier man.

He had been a believer in such old wives' fables as "Honesty is the best policy," "Stolen money yields no profit," "Dishonest houses bury the builders," with much other traditional philosophy of a similar character. Now he had proved how worthless and silly it all was.

He had taken his friend's advice, and with a hundred pounds had bought eight hundred pounds' worth of Bonson stock, and within a week of buying the shares they had jumped up to par, and were still advancing.

He walked to and from the school-house like a man in a dream. He had visions of becoming a millionaire. There was every prospect that "Bonsons" might reach £10 a share. If so he should of course sell out and invest in other things. He believed that he had a genius for finance, and that

the money he had stolen, instead of giving him trouble, would be the making of him.

That trouble was in store for Harry he saw clearly enough. The Earl was daily getting better. That was the only unlucky part of the whole business. If he would only quietly slip out of time, as he ought to do, there would be no further trouble for anyone, but by getting better he would make things unpleasant all round. The vicar would be awfully disappointed, try to hide it as he might, and so would his son Rupert. The forgery would of course be discovered, and would be traced home to Harry, and he would have to pay the penalty.

"But that is the way of this highly moral and beautifully-managed world," he said to himself, with a curl of the lip. "It is always the honest who suffer. Virtue gets rewarded, of course it does, by being sent to gaol," and he chuckled as over a good joke.

"Oh, honesty is a lovely thing in theory," he went on. "It did wonders for me. It kept me consistently at the point of starvation, it sent me to church every Sunday to play the hypocrite, it made me obsequious to my betters, it robbed me of my independence. But the moment I kicked over the traces I became a free man," and he rubbed his chin gleefully and smiled. By the end of a fortnight "Bonsons" had gone up to two pounds a share.

"Think of it," said Robert Morton to himself, as he walked briskly to school, "within a fortnight I am worth sixteen hundred pounds, and all this out of stolen money that yields no profit. Strange, what fools we are to be ruled by old wives' fables,"

Robert said nothing of his good fortune to any of the members of his own family. A secret that is shared is no longer a secret. They noticed that he was infinitely more cheerful than he had been of late, but attributed it entirely to the fact that he was no longer pressed by his creditors—that is, Harry and Mrs. Morton did; the girls and Bob, of course, knew nothing about the matter.

Robert would have given up his school and retired to London but for the fact that such a step might excite suspicion. No, he would have to stay until the storm burst, and play his *rôle* of rogue and liar and hypocrite to the end. It would be unpleasant, no doubt, to face Harry's anger and contempt, but it would soon be over. Evidently the Earl was determined to get better—another proof of the idiotic principles on which the world was governed—so Harry would have to be the scapegoat.

Meanwhile, Harry was going on steadily with his studies, unconscious of the storm that was gradually gathering over his head. Occasionally he was a little depressed, and pined for the light and inspiration of Monica's smile, but on the whole he kept up his courage and hoped for the best. He avoided the field path that led across the park, not that he imagined that Monica might be loitering there, but the vicar or Rupert might be, and he wanted to avoid even the appearance of seeking an interview with Monica. He had given his promise to the Earl, and he was determined to keep it. He heard now and then that Monica was scarcely seen out of doors. She spent nearly all her time with her

guardian. Had he been her own father she could not have been more attentive to him.

There was, perhaps, another reason why Monica did not much care to venture out alone—three reasons in fact. Rupert Grant she knew was keeping diligent watch over her actions, and was always waiting to pounce down upon her directly she ventured out of doors, and she did not want to see Rupert Grant. She preferred his room to his company. Also, she had begun to have an inkling of the little domestic plot that was being hatched for her disposal, and she resented it. She was only a girl yet, and the idea of matrimony was very distasteful to her, especially when it was intended that Rupert Grant should figure as the bridegroom. The third reason was she did not wish to compromise Harry Morton in any way. She was not quite certain yet if she had not been indiscreet at their last meeting. Young ladies as a rule do not ask to be kissed.

“But it was only Harry,” she said to herself in self-defence, “and we have known each other nearly all our lives. Besides, it was good-bye, and I know he’ll not think the worse of me.”

Monica had no idea of breaking through the compact. It was one of those stupid things that had to be, and she would have to make the best of it. The world was full of stupid things, and life was hedged round with all kinds of irritating formalities. It always had been so, she had been told, and would most likely remain so to the end of the world. Now and then she felt inclined to rebel, but she quickly saw the futility of it. What Harry had said to her

had already come true. She was in a cage, and she might batter herself to death and no good would come of it.

She did not pine for Harry as he did for her, and for the simple reason that she was not in love in the sense that he was. She frankly admitted that she was very fond of him, and that she liked him better than any friend that she had. She had faith in him, too. She believed that he was clever, and would make his way in the world; and some day even the stupid world, including the vicar and his son, might admit that socially he was her equal, and if that day ever came she sometimes wondered what would happen.

She had no time, however, for indulging in day-dreams. Her guardian demanded nearly all her time and attention. When he was able to sit up she sometimes read to him; she even transacted some business that he did not care to entrust to Robert Morton. She got a square envelope and sent his bank-book to London, and wrote one or two private letters at his dictation. She was pleased beyond measure to discover that she was of some use in the world, and suggested to the Earl that she should be his private secretary always.

It was a warm day in early July that Lord Menheniot sat in a small sitting-room opening out of his bedroom, with his pass-book open before him. It had just come down by post, and naturally he was curious to see what the balance was, and what his total expenditure had been for the past six months.

In the pocket of the pass-book was a bundle of

cheques all punctured and endorsed, and in the order in which they had been cashed. These he would compare directly with the entries in the book.

Suddenly he started and gave a little exclamation of surprise.

"Bearer, two hundred and fifty pounds?" he said slowly, in a questioning tone. "There must be some mistake surely; I have made out no cheque to 'Bearer.' I never do, in fact. Clerk too lazy to copy the name, I expect. But let me think, I have drawn no cheque for that amount since the last balance. I should surely remember that sum. But where is the cheque?" and he pulled the bundle out of the pocket and ran through them. It was the last of the list, and no sooner did his eye rest upon it than he started to his feet and then sat down again.

"That is not my signature," he said, with a gasp; "I could swear to it, though, by Jove! it is a remarkably good imitation."

The next moment there came a slight rap at the door, and the vicar entered.

"I say, Grant," he cried, looking very white and excited, "look at this cheque. What do you say to that signature?"

"Well, what is amiss with it?" said the vicar, adjusting his spectacles and regarding it attentively.

"Matter with it! Why, everything is the matter with it. Would you really accept that as my signature?"

"I should most certainly," the vicar answered slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"Why, because the signature is not mine. It is

a base forgery. I never drew that cheque. Do you think I should be such an idiot as to send out an uncrossed cheque for £250 payable to bearer?" and he stamped his foot angrily at the suggestion.

"Certainly, my dear cousin; it is not like you to do such a thing," said the vicar, mildly; "and if it is a forgery we must probe the matter to the bottom."

"If it is a forgery? I tell you there is no 'if' in the case. I'll stake my life upon it. It is a base, damnable forgery."

"But, my dear cousin, you must not excite yourself over the matter," said the vicar; "you remember what the specialist said about avoiding excitement. Another effusion of blood to the brain might prove fatal."

"You are quite right, Grant," said the Earl, in a milder tone; "my life is more to me than £250; nevertheless this is a matter that cannot be allowed to rest."

"That is quite true. But leave the matter in my hands. If you like I will go down at once and consult Brown and Brown, your solicitors."

"Do," said the Earl, eagerly, "and take the cheque with you."

"But you must promise not to worry yourself," said the vicar.

"Tell Brown I leave the matter entirely in his hands. Let him probe it to the bottom if possible, and bring the thief to justice, and say nothing to me about it until it is done."

"That is a wise course," said the vicar, patronisingly. "It is most essential that you should not worry yourself over the matter."

The Earl looked up at his relative and smiled. His disinterestedness and solicitude were quite remarkable.

To do the vicar justice, however, he was less disappointed than might have been expected at the Earl's recovery. Much less disappointed than were his wife and son. Of course, it is not in human nature to see a prize almost within one's grasp, and then see it slip away again without some little regret.

For a few days he had walked as in a dream, and looked with pride across the green acres of Graystone. He had pictured himself taking his seat in the House of Lords, and rubbing shoulders with the greatest in the land. Then the dream faded, and he found himself back again in the obscure and humdrum path of toil and duty. No, it was not without a pang that he saw the bright vision fade. But he had his consolation also.

It was not in vain that he believed in the Gospel which he preached, and, proving its power to sustain and comfort in disappointment, he was able to preach it with more effect to others. It was his nearest approach yet to experimental religion, and a clear experience to fall back upon is always a power in a man's life.

His was not a great or an heroic nature. Indeed, he was capable of things that were mean and little. Nevertheless, he saw, as in a glass, certain ideals, and though he never rose to them, they were not without their influence on his character. He tried to feel thankful that the Earl was daily getting better, and if there were moments when he did not

feel thankful at all, but rather the reverse, let that be written down to his infirmity.

The Earl half doubted the genuineness of his solicitude, but he kept his doubts to himself.

"If I were in his place," he reflected, when the vicar had taken his departure, "I do believe I should feel horribly chagrined, and I'm afraid I should show it, too."

Later in the day Robert Morton came to his employer for instructions. There were certain cottages in Graystone that wanted repairing, also a farm that had fallen vacant and would want re-letting.

That the case of the forged cheque should come up was inevitable. Robert was quite prepared for it, and had rehearsed his part with great diligence.

He appeared so astonished at the Earl's announcement that he dropped into a chair and stared.

"You may well be astonished," said Lord Menheniot; "it is the most unaccountable thing I have ever heard of."

"And have you no clue to the forger?" Robert asked, with a little gasp.

"Not yet, of course; and the mischief is I dare not worry over the matter myself. You know the one thing I have to avoid—for the present, at least—is excitement."

"So I understand."

"But I have put the matter into the hands of Brown and Brown, and I have little doubt but they will be able to track the thief."

"It is to be hoped so," said Robert, leaning forward in his chair and looking unflinchingly into

the Earl's face. He had learned his lesson well, and was priding himself on the way in which he acted his part.

"The stupid cashier ought to have known," Lord Menheniot went on; "it is well known I always cross my cheques and never under any circumstances make them payable to bearer."

"Of course all the cashiers may not have been aware of that," Robert answered, reflectively; "and then at a City bank they are generally so busy."

"The puzzle to me is," said the Earl, "that any other customer of the Bank should have been able to get hold of my signature and copy it so closely. But I think there is little doubt that we shall discover the author of the fraud."

"And such a crime cannot be condoned," Robert said, with emphasis.

"Condoned? I should think not indeed. Of all crimes against property it seems to me the worst. If we can only find the criminal he shall be made to suffer."

It proved a very much easier matter than Lord Menheniot had imagined to run to earth what appeared to be the real criminal. Rupert Grant assisted Mr. Brown in the delicate task, and directly he got an inkling of what appeared to be the truth he was almost beside himself with excitement and delight.

Rupert was still smarting under the castigation he had received; hence the thought of seeing Harry branded as a criminal and punished as he deserved gave him the most exquisite satisfaction. Not only

would he get his revenge, but Monica's girlish idol would be shattered at the same time, and the way would be left clear for him to go in and win.

"My star is in the ascendant after all," he said to himself, gleefully, and he chuckled and rubbed his hands.

Having struck the right trail it proved the easiest thing in the world to follow it to the end.

"There are two things we must be careful not to do, Brown," Rupert said one day to the lawyer. "In the first place, we must not strike till we are quite ready and every link in the chain of evidence is complete. And in the next place, we must say nothing to the Earl about it until the thief is in custody."

"Why not?" asked the lawyer, sharply.

"First, because a misfire would make us look like two fools; and second, because the Earl has an unexplained fondness for the thief and might prevent the law taking its course."

"H'm, yes, I think you are right," said the lawyer, reflectively. "But I think in a couple of days at the outside we shall be able to inform him that the thief is in gaol."

So, while the mesh was gradually and imperceptibly tightening round him, Harry went steadily on with his work, blissfully unconscious of the approaching trouble.

There was no sign of the gathering storm, no shadow cast before. When the blow fell it was a veritable bolt out of the blue, and for a while his brain seemed to reel under the shock.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORM BURSTS.

HARRY and Madge were returning from a long ramble in the hush and cool of the evening. Madge was older than Dora, and was much more of a companion for him. Also they had more in common; Madge reminded him of Monica, and was like her in many things. She had the same fearlessness, the same sunny disposition, the same cheerful outlook upon life.

They were walking slowly, for they had grown tired; besides, the evening of a summer's day is the most enjoyable part of it. There was no roar of traffic or scream of railway engines to disturb the quiet. The lowing of kine had ceased, for milking time was past. Even the birds had hushed their songs, save a happy thrush here and there that could not quite contain the pent-up volume of its song. They had left the village behind them and were nearing home.

Conversation between them had tapered off into silence; they had talked so much earlier on, that there was now little left to say, and neither was in the mood to say it. The spirit of the evening was upon them. Madge leaned upon her brother's arm and kept step with him. Now and then she looked up into his strong, handsome face and smiled

faintly. She was very proud of Harry, and pictured for him a far greater future than he dared picture for himself.

Coming towards them were two policemen. It was not often that policemen were seen in pairs in the quiet lanes round Graystone. It was not often they were seen at all. Harry and Madge both watched their approach with interest, though neither had the least suspicion of danger. Nearer and nearer they came, and paused directly in front of them, compelling Harry and Madge to pause also.

"Your name is Harry Morton, I think?" said the elder of the two, who did all the talking.

"Yes, that is my name," Harry answered, indifferently.

"Then it is my painful duty to inform you that I hold a warrant for your arrest."

"For my arrest?" repeated Harry, slowly, as if not sure he had heard aright, while Madge clung to his arm too astonished to utter a word.

"For your arrest, sir," was the laconic reply.

"I think you must be making a mistake," Harry said, quite calmly, for as yet no suspicion of the truth had crossed his mind.

"I can assure you there is no mistake," the constable answered. "Here is the warrant, which you can read for yourself, if you like."

Harry, however, did not read. He was too impatient for that.

"On what charge do you arrest me?" he asked, with quivering lip.

"Forgery, sir. But——"

"Oh, you wicked man!" shrieked Madge. "Go away with you! how dare you——"

"Hush, Madge," Harry said, gently. "It is all a mistake, it will be put right later on." Then, turning to the officer, he said, "Forgery of what?"

"Well, that is not exactly my business," was the smiling reply, "and I suppose it is only natural that you should pretend ignorance, especially in the presence of the young lady."

"Pretend ignorance!" he said, with fine scorn.

"Anyhow, you are my prisoner," said the constable, "charged with forging Lord Menheniot's name on a cheque for £250, and I would advise you to say nothing now, as it may be used as evidence at the trial."

For a moment Harry's eyes blazed, then a strange subdued, far-away look came into them. Madge, still clinging to his arm, looked at him and wondered.

For several seconds he did not speak. All the truth came to him as in a flash. He required no further explanation. He saw not merely the dishonesty of the man he called father, but the meanness and treachery. He understood now why he showed no pleasure at the Earl's recovery, why he kept so much aloof of late from the other members of the family, why his face seemed to brighten at any news that the Earl was not so well.

At first Harry's indignation knew no bounds. Then pity began to mingle with it. He saw the stress, the occasion, the temptation. His father had expected that the Earl would die, in which case the fraud in all probability would never be discovered.

Then his anger got the better of him again. It seemed so contemptibly mean and wicked, so ineffably cowardly, so to plan his crime that in case of discovery suspicion should fall upon another, and that other his own son.

Harry bit his lip to keep from hurling anathemas at his supposed father, but Madge was still clinging to his arm and lifting appealing eyes to his, and for Madge's sake he must be silent.

"I'm ready to go with you, officer," he said, firmly; "there's been a mistake, and God alone knows if it will ever be rectified."

"But what am I to do?" Madge asked, the tears starting suddenly in her eyes.

"Go quietly home, Madge, and tell father to come and see me as early as possible—not to-night, for it is too late; but as early as possible to-morrow."

"Oh, Harry, I cannot," she wailed.

"But you must, Madge. I shall be all right, never fear," and he stooped and kissed her.

She tried to cling to him, but he put her gently aside, and left her standing in the middle of the road.

For several minutes she watched him as he walked away between the two policemen; then, turning, she rushed home with all possible haste, and, bursting into the room where her father and mother were sitting, she cried out in an agony of distress:

"Oh, father, they have taken Harry to prison."

"To prison!" cried her mother, starting to her feet, while Robert Morton rose slowly from his chair but did not speak.

"Yes, to prison," Madge cried, the tears starting

again in her eyes; "they say he has forged a cheque or something of the kind."

Instantly Mrs. Morton's face grew ashy pale. She looked at her husband with trembling lips, but seemed unable to speak, then sank helplessly into the chair from which she had risen.

Robert looked at her with a curious light in his eyes, then said, with apparent calmness, "Don't be alarmed, mother; there must be a mistake somewhere."

She was a weak, confiding woman, who had unbounded faith in her husband's capabilities. She looked up to him in everything, scarcely having a will of her own. On the whole he treated her kindly and affectionately, but he was the ruling force in the house, and she yielded to his will generally without a word.

Madge looked from one to the other with bewildered eyes. She could not understand her father's apparent unconcern. What did he know? Why did he not speak to her and explain things?

"Surely, father," she cried, "he has not done what he is charged with."

"No, Madge," he answered, "there is a mistake somewhere; but these mistakes cannot be rectified in a moment."

"And are we to remain here doing nothing?" she asked, impatiently.

"What can we do?" he replied; "if the cheque that Harry cashed has been forged, of course that is a matter that will have to be inquired into and proved. It does not follow that he is guilty, and we must hope for the best."

"Oh, I cannot endure it," Madge replied; "to think that he should be in a prison all the night, and we home here in our comfortable beds."

"Oh, he will not mind that very much," Robert answered indifferently; "men like to rough it now and then."

"But you must go first thing in the morning," she said; "that was his last word to me."

"Don't fear, Madge," he replied, "everything shall be done that can be done;" and with that he retired from the room to his own little office.

During the night Robert Morton slept scarcely a wink. How to face his nephew he did not know. Sooner or later, of course, he would have to talk the matter over with him, but he dreaded the interview so much that he was prepared to grasp at any excuse for not going.

By morning he had found an excuse that was satisfactory. He developed suddenly and unaccountably an attack of rheumatism which would not allow him to get out of bed. He lay quite still and with much patience while the hours of the day passed on. He declined to have a doctor called in; he was quite sure, he said, that the attack would soon pass away. His wife believed that he was suffering great pain, and indeed he was mentally. Physically, perhaps, he had never been better in his life. But he simulated bodily pain with great success, and his face wore an expression of positive torture.

Word was sent to Harry as soon as possible that his supposed father was unable to see him, that he was confined to his bed by sudden illness. Harry curled his lip with something like a smile when this

message was delivered, but he made no remark. He realised in a moment where the difficulty lay, and wondered what part he should play in this painful drama.

Early in the forenoon he was brought before the magistrates, and listened with curious interest to the evidence that was brought against him. Proof after proof was marshalled in logical sequence. Those who had been investigating the matter had left no weak link in the chain of evidence. The story of his interview with the Earl the night previous to his illness was told. The Earl had to admit that he found Harry in his private room, that his desk was wide open and his cheque-book and many papers of importance were lying about.

The cashier of the bank swore positively that Harry was the man who cashed the cheque on the day following. Two or three experts who had made very careful examination of the signature were positive that it was forged; also the Earl sent his written affidavit to that effect. Indeed, the whole case was so clear and convincing that the magistrates had no other course open to them than to commit Harry for trial at the forthcoming assizes on the charge of forgery, bail being refused.

The proceedings were exceedingly brief and formal. It was understood that Harry reserved his defence, though in reality he did not speak to any one. He kept his eyes most of the time on the presiding magistrate, but in turning to leave the dock his eyes rested on the face of Rupert Grant, and a cloud swept across his brow in a moment. The look of triumph in Rupert's eyes, the cynical smile that

curled his lip, maddened him almost beyond endurance. Had he not caught that glimpse he would have returned to his cell with a comparatively light heart, but that look stung him to the quick, and sent the blood rushing in a torrent to his face.

Meanwhile, Monica, like an uneasy ghost, was walking through the great house of Graystone unable to rest anywhere. The news had fallen upon her like a thunderclap, and for a while completely stunned her. Could it be possible that Harry, who in many respects was her ideal, had descended to this base crime?

She rushed off to her guardian to know what it meant, and he, with a grave face, told her that he feared it was only too true.

"We have all been deceived by his handsome appearance and winning ways," he said, "and have discovered that beneath his pleasant exterior he carries an evil heart."

But Monica, in spite of all that her guardian said, steadfastly refused to believe that Harry was guilty.

"No," she said, "it cannot be; it is simply impossible."

"My child," said the Earl, "nothing is impossible in the matter of evil in this wicked world. Temptation comes to all men, and we are all honest until we are tempted beyond our strength."

"But I am sure this would be no temptation to him," she cried; "he isn't a miser who loves money for its own sake."

"No, my child, but he has had to run into many expenses lately. He has been earning very little

for some time past. It is possible that those who trusted him have become pressing. It may be that he was in the clutches of some money-lender, and this was the only way of getting out. Who can tell? When people are in great straits they do desperate things."

"No, no, guardy," she cried, "he would never do that."

"Alas! my child, many a man apparently better than he has done much worse things. One grieves to have to say it, but facts cannot be gainsaid."

So, finding that she could get no comfort from her guardian she left him and wandered disconsolately through the big house.

"Oh, if I could only see him," she said, wringing her hands; "if I could only hear from his own lips that he is innocent, then I should be satisfied in spite of everything that people might say."

She never realised till now how much Harry had become to her, how completely his trouble was hers, how she sympathised with him in this calamity. And yet—and yet—if in the end it should prove true that he was guilty of crime, she believed her faith in human nature would vanish for ever.

At last a desperate resolve began to shape itself in her mind. She would go and see him for herself; she would run all risks and dare all unfriendly comments. He would not be removed yet to the county gaol, and in the meantime she felt certain that she had influence enough to see him in his cell. Of course, she would have to keep the matter a secret from her guardian and every one else. She knew that the enterprise would be considered Quixotic and

altogether unbecoming in a young girl, yet she felt as though she would lose her reason unless she could have the truth from his own lips, and there was no way of getting that except by an interview with him.

Before she had time, however, to order the dog-cart to be brought round, Rupert Grant was announced. Monica advanced to meet him with a positive frown clouding her face; she had scarcely grace to be civil to him.

"Good afternoon, Monica," he said, with his blandest smile.

"Good afternoon, Rupert," she answered, and there was a coldness in her tone that he was quick to detect.

"You do not seem quite yourself to-day," he replied, hesitatingly.

"I am not myself; I am troubled a good deal; in fact, I do not feel at all well."

"You should get out into the sunshine," he answered; "it is simply lovely out of doors; you would be much better outside than coping yourself up here in the shadow."

"I intend going out directly."

"And may I have the pleasure of accompanying you?" he questioned.

"I prefer being alone, thank you."

He bit his lip, and for a moment was silent. Then, looking at her, he said: "I hope, Monica, you are not worrying yourself over this affair of Morton's?"

"And if I am?" she questioned.

"Of course it is only natural that we should all be

more or less distressed; in fact, I am quite distressed myself; I am right down sorry for the young man."

"Don't tell lies, Rupert," she answered, quickly; "you are not sorry, you are glad."

"Monica, Monica," he said, in tones of reproof, "how can you say such things?"

"Any one can see it in your eyes," she replied; "you are rejoiced at the downfall of your enemy."

"On the contrary," he replied, "I am deeply grieved; no man can think of another yielding to such temptation without feeling distressed in consequence."

"You are assuming, like the rest of them, that he has yielded to temptation," she said, bitterly. "Why not give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"Unfortunately, Monica," he replied, seriously, "there is no doubt in the case; the evidence is circumstantial, I grant, but there is not a single link in the chain missing; every point has been cleared up."

"He has not been proved guilty by an English jury yet," she said, "and every man should be considered honest until his guilt is proved. I have been told that that is English law."

"In the eye of the law, certainly, every man is innocent until he has been proved to be guilty; but in this case there is no escape."

"Of course you will say there is no escape," she answered, with a flash of indignation in her eyes; "people can always find what they look for."

"I think you are scarcely fair to me, Monica," he said, in hurt tones. "I confess I have never had any great liking for the fellow; he assumed too much to please me, and has so constantly aped the gentle-

man. Those common people are rarely to be trusted, and I rather pride myself that I was never able to trust him from the first, and as events have proved my doubts were justified."

"You are very clever, Rupert; we have long known that," she answered.

"Don't be unkind, Monica," he said; "of course one can but feel for you; it must be a terrible humiliation in your case; you made so much of the fellow to the grief and annoyance of us all."

"Indeed, I cannot see that it was any concern of yours."

"Perhaps not, Monica, but I hope some day you will look at things differently. Let us not quarrel about a fellow who is not worth quarrelling about. We have been deceived, and the sooner we forget him and this painful affair the better. Now, Monica, will you not come with me for a walk in the park? You look as pale as a ghost, you do, really. You should get out into the sunshine for a little while."

"I am quite well, thank you, Rupert," she answered, stiffly, "and for the present, at any rate, prefer to be alone."

For a moment his eyes blazed, but he quickly recovered himself and answered in his mildest manner.

"I will consider your wish, Monica, in this as I am anxious to do in all other matters," and he turned and walked towards the door.

"Lord Menheniot is in his own room," she said, as he was closing the door behind him, "and I have no doubt he will be pleased to see you."

"Thank you, Monica," and the door was shut with a snap.

Monica went back to her chair by the window and sat down. Resting her chin upon her hand she looked out upon the wide rolling landscape, but she did not see it; her thoughts were elsewhere. It seemed to her as if within the past few hours she had lived for years; she was no longer a thoughtless, light-hearted girl; the burden of life had suddenly come upon her. She had awakened to the fact that she was a woman, and that there were sorrows and distresses to be faced and endured. Then, rising suddenly to her feet, she left the room, and gave orders for the dog-cart to be brought round immediately. Ten minutes later she climbed into the cart by the side of Sam, the groom, and was driven quickly away. Rupert, descending the steps from the front door at the moment, looked at her with surprise, and wondered what sudden freak had taken her.

CHAPTER X.

VISITORS.

HARRY was seated, wrapped in thought, on the hard mattress that had served him for a bed on the previous night. He was still undecided as to his course of action, though he was gradually coming round to the conviction that there was only one thing to be done.

Suppose he were to say that his father stole the cheque and forged the signature, he could not prove it, and his bare word would go for nothing. Nobody would believe him. Moreover, such a statement would prejudice his case. Neither judge nor jury would show pity to a man who tried to escape from the consequences of his wrong-doing by libelling his own father. Besides, Madge was to be considered, and Dora and Bob, as well as that meek-eyed woman he called mother.

So little by little the conviction was forced home to him that he was absolutely helpless, and even if he could escape himself by incriminating his father he would gain no satisfaction thereby. Except to himself, it was of little moment what became of him. He had no one dependent upon him. He could suffer in silence, and the world would go on just as well without him. But with Robert Morton it would be different. If he were found guilty and imprisoned

the whole family would suffer. The prospects of Madge and Dora would be ruined, and Mrs. Morton would break her heart and die.

"Willingly or unwillingly I shall have to be the scapegoat," he said to himself; "there seems no escape for me, and every dream and ambition will end in smoke."

His one and only consolation lay in the fact that whether willingly or no, he was befriending Mrs. Morton and the children. For Robert Morton he had no pity. Had he been merely weak he could have forgiven him, but his meanness and treachery and cruelty deserved no compassion.

That his temptation was great he fully admitted. That his habitual cynicism and contempt for religion had weakened his moral fibre seemed only too evident. That the opportunity had made the thief was also to be conceded. But for his cowardice and treachery there was no excuse; and if he could see him punished without inflicting punishment on others he would rejoice unfeignedly.

The fact that he believed he was his father did not count. A man who, to save his own skin, would ruin his own son forfeited all affection; such an act severed for ever the bond of relationship.

"He is no longer my father," Harry said to himself, with clenched hands, "and I am no more his son."

The afternoon sun was getting low and streaming slantwise through the narrow window of his cell, filling it with a rich warm light. He moved himself a little so that he might get into the direct line of the sun's rays, and he smiled as he did so.

The next moment he heard the key turned in the lock and the door was thrown open. But he did not turn his head—the entrance of a policeman or magistrate was of no interest to him—but the light was good and pleasant to the eyes and cheering to the heart, so he kept his face turned toward the light and the smile lingered round his lips.

Then the rustle of a dress fell faintly on his ears, and the odour as of spring flowers suddenly filled the place. He turned his head quickly, and there stood Monica, pale and trembling.

“Monica,” he gasped, springing to his feet, “what brings you here?”

“I came to see you, Harry,” she answered, faintly; and then she broke down and began to sob. For several seconds he looked at her in silence. He longed to take her in his arms and kiss her. For a moment he forgot the difference in their station. He was a boy again, and Monica was his companion and comrade. But it was only for a moment; and then the bitter truth swept like an icy wave over his heart.

“Does the Earl know you are here?” he asked at length.

“No, Harry, no one knows; but please don’t be angry with me. I could not rest until I had seen you.”

“Angry, Monica!” and then he suddenly choked and turned away his head to hide his emotion.

“They all say that you are guilty,” she said, brokenly; “but—but—I will not believe it until you tell me so with your own lips.”

“God bless you, Monica,” was all he could answer.



"YES, MONICA, I AM INNOCENT, BUT, ALAS! I CANNOT PROVE IT."

See p. 109.

"I knew they were all wrong," she said, cheerfully; "how stupid they must all be to think you could do such a thing."

He turned and smiled at her, though his lips were trembling still.

"And of course you will be able to clear yourself at the trial," she went on, with a little catch in her breath.

Instantly the smile faded from his face.

"No, Monica; while I have been sitting here I have been thinking it all out and I can see no escape. I can prove nothing, and the evidence against me is overwhelming."

"But you are innocent, Harry?"

"Yes, Monica, I am innocent, but, alas! I cannot prove it. On the other hand, it can be proved that I went to London with a forged cheque, that I cashed it at the bank, that I spent part of the money before I returned. It can be proved also that I was in the Earl's room alone the night before, that his desk was wide open and his cheque-book within easy reach; and lastly, a dozen people know that I am what is called smart with the pen; that I can imitate almost anything, which, unfortunately, I have given proof of times without number. Now, Monica, can you see that, though I am innocent, I have only my bare word for it, while every circumstance points in the opposite direction?"

"But you must know where you got the cheque from?"

"But what good will that do me? Suppose I were to say I got it from you, which I didn't, or from the vicar, which I didn't, or from somebody else,

which I did? How should I be any better off? Who would believe me? On the other hand, I should be branded as a mean scoundrel for trying to get off by incriminating some honest man."

"Then you have to sit down and suffer in silence?"

"As far as I can see at present that is the only course open to me."

"And is there no possible way of escape?" she asked, wringing her hands.

"Not unless the guilty party confesses," he answered, with a hard look in his eyes, "and that is not at all likely."

"But suppose you challenge him with it?"

"And suppose he denies it?"

Monica was silent. She began to see now what she had never quite understood before—the difficulty of proving a negative.

"But at least you know who the forger is?" she asked at length.

"I know who gave me the cheque," he answered, with a smile, "but he might tell me that he received it from some one else, and how could I prove that he did not?"

"Oh, dear," she cried, "the more you look at it the worse it grows."

"That is so, Monica; I have looked at it until my brain has reeled, but I can see no loophole anywhere."

"But you are innocent, Harry. You have at least that satisfaction," she said, with swimming eyes.

"You do not doubt me, do you?" he asked eagerly.

"No, Harry, I have never doubted you. Only—

only— they have all been so emphatic that I wanted to hear the truth from your own lips.”

He looked at her sadly, but did not reply.

“Don’t blame me, Harry,” she went on after a pause; “women want to be assured. I think we are all alike. It is not that we doubt, only we like to have assurance.”

“If you still believe in me, Monica,” he said at length, “I can bear the rest.”

He would have said more, but the door was thrown open again and a policeman entered. Monica understood that the time was up, and held out her hand to Harry in token of good-bye. Neither of them spoke again. For a long moment he held her hand in silence, then turned away and walked to the far end of the cell. He heard the door close and the key grate in the lock, then with a groan he came back and threw himself on the mattress and hid his face in his hands.

The sinking sun had disappeared; the cell had grown comparatively dark, but the smell of flowers still lingered in the heavy air. Harry lay quite still, but his heart was in a strange tumult. He knew that it had cost Monica an unspeakable effort to come and see him, that she had deliberately dared her guardian’s anger and the evil tongues of all who might get to know, that she had broken through the compact not to see him again and laid herself open to unfriendly comment. How should he interpret such conduct?

“She is only a girl yet,” he said to himself at length, “and it is her nature to do Quixotic things. I hope she will not be angry with herself when she

gets older. She hasn't realised yet the impassable gulf that lies between us, and the bridge I once dreamed of building can never be constructed now."

He tried his hardest to be philosophic, but it was a very difficult matter. Love's young dream to youth and maiden is sweeter than anything else on earth; and Harry loved Monica with all the strength of a strong and earnest nature, loved her all the more passionately perhaps because she was beyond his reach, while her friendliness to him had added fuel to the fire.

He did not try to hide from himself the fact that she had shown him very marked favour. She had admitted in her frank girlish way that she cared more for him than for any one else. Of course he knew that there was a very wide difference between the mere "liking" of a girl and the love of a woman. And yet, and yet, had he been free to take advantage of her friendship he believed in time it might grow into love.

All that, however, was at an end now. The hope of winning success and renown had suddenly perished. He dared not contemplate the future. His only hope of endurance lay in trying to forget the past and refusing to anticipate the future. He would have to bear a day at a time, and so slowly live out the agony of life to its bitter end.

Every now and then his heart rose up in bitter wrath against the man he called his father, and he would pace his cell in a state bordering on frenzy, but his anger did him no good—it only left him weak and nerveless and exhausted.

A week later Robert Morton had summoned up

sufficient courage to visit him in the county gaol. It was with a sense of great relief that he had heard that at the trial before the magistrates Harry had said nothing to implicate him. He recovered rapidly from his rheumatism after that, and the next day was able to get downstairs. But to visit Harry required an amount of strength and determination that he could not muster in a moment or in a day.

Like a timid bather he hesitated and hesitated, fearing to take the plunge. Yet all the while he was intensely curious to know what line of defence Harry intended to take. It had only recently occurred to him that his position was not quite as free from danger as he had at first imagined. If Harry chose to tell all he knew he might be arraigned on the charge of being an accessory after the act. It could be easily shown that the debts Harry had liquidated were his (Robert's) debts, though contracted on Harry's account, and that threats of legal action had not been sent to his nephew, but to him.

All this, if brought out at the trial, might place him in a very awkward, not to say perilous, position, and though Harry's punishment might be none the less, his might be considerably more.

So anxious did he become at length that it broke down every other consideration. He must know the best or the worst, however painful might be the interview.

He looked quite haggard and ill when he was shown into Harry's presence.

Harry had felt sure that he would come sooner or later, and so was not in the least surprised when

the door was thrown open and the guilty man staggered in.

Robert had framed a little speech with which he intended to open the interview, but the sight of Harry standing calm and dignified and apparently unmoved drove it completely out of his head. He made a violent effort to say something, but his tongue became suddenly dry and parched and refused to move. The next moment a mist came up before his eyes, and but for the nearness of the wall he would have staggered and fallen.

Harry looked at him half pityingly, half angrily. The drawn, haggard face, the ashy lips, the bent shoulders, appealed irresistibly to his sympathy. Then the thought of the man's treachery stabbed him like a knife, and he drew himself away a step or two lest he should be tempted to strike.

Robert Morton saw the movement, and a tinge of colour came back to his cheeks.

"I have been ill," he gasped at length, "or I would have come to see you sooner."

"I have not pined for your company," was the cold reply.

"No, I suppose not. Still I am very sorry, as you may be sure, that things have turned out as they have."

"Indeed. I thought your plotting left no option."

"No one thought at the time," he gasped, in a low whisper, "that—that—he could possibly recover."

"Nevertheless, you provided for the contingency," Harry said, bitterly.

"That was a mere accident,"

“Of which you seemed quite willing that I should take the consequences.”

“I have come to discuss that matter,” he said, feebly. “If it were not for mother and the children I would not mind. You see, they are all dependent upon me yet. For myself I do not care, but to drag them down”—and he looked furtively at Harry to see the effect of his words.

It was a master stroke of policy on his part, and showed that he knew Harry almost as well as Harry knew himself.

For a while silence fell between them; then Robert began again.

“I own I am pretty much in your hands, and if you are hot for revenge you can make it very uncomfortable for me.”

Harry pulled himself together in a moment, and an angry wave swept over his heart. The man’s cowardice and lack of magnanimity would come out in spite of everything.

“It is well you have mother and Bob and the girls to hide behind,” he retorted, wrathfully. “For such as you one need have no compunction.”

“I have been a good father to you and the rest,” Robert answered, with downcast eyes, “and if I got into debt it was for your sake. Moreover, the amount taken was no more than the Earl promised.”

Harry relented again. There was truth, no doubt, in what he said, and on the whole he was weak rather than wicked.

“You have evidently no intention of trying to release me?” Harry questioned, after a pause.

“I would do it but for the others,” was the reply.

"I doubt it," Harry answered, turning, and walking to the other end of the cell.

"One of us must suffer, that's certain," Robert said ; "you would get off much easier than I should. For youth there is always an excuse, but never for an old man."

"It is not the years in gaol that count," Harry answered, moodily, "but the years that follow. I have all my life before me."

"The world is big," was the reply, "and the memory of men is short."

"It is easy for you to philosophise when your own skin is safe, but put yourself in my place."

"I own it is hard, and I am sorry from my heart."

"I think we have said enough," was the reply ; "no good can come of prolonging this interview. You can go home content. For the sake of mother and the girls and Bob I will let you escape. Now get away with you ; I shall be happier when you are gone."

"And you have no message for the others ?"

"Yes, give them all my love. For yourself, take warning by this, lest your treacheries come home to roost."

Robert did not wait for any further words ; with a sigh of relief he left the cell, and hurried as quickly as possible along the echoing corridor, never slackening speed until he was safe out in the sunshine.

A month later Harry was brought up at the assizes for trial.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VICAR IS CONCERNED.

“THE great forgery case,” as the local newspapers dubbed it, was very quickly disposed of. Nevertheless it awakened a considerable amount of interest, not only in the county but in London itself. Most of the financial papers devoted leading articles to it, and the conduct of the cashier who accepted the cheque was very freely criticised, both by the Press and by business men in going to and from the City.

The forgery itself was denounced as the clumsiest fraud that any sane man ever attempted to perpetrate, and Harry’s conduct at the trial was declared to be of a piece with the rest of his conduct. Not a few charitably disposed people said that the young fellow was evidently out of his mind and that the kindest thing would be to send him to a lunatic asylum.

There was practically no defence at the trial. Harry saw clearly enough that any defence he might offer would only result in more or less incriminating Robert Morton without releasing himself. During the weeks he lay waiting for the trial, he carefully weighed all the pros and cons of the case, and when at length he stood before the judge his mind was quite made up. He resolutely refused to plead guilty. In vain it was pointed out to him that if he did so it might materially lighten the sentence.

"A year or two more or less," he said, "can make little difference. Besides, I am not guilty, and why should I say I am?"

The twelve jurymen knew better. They said, without a dissenting voice, that he was a rogue, and since he had declared he was innocent he was therefore also a liar. The judge quite concurred in their view of the case. In face of the evidence any other view was impossible. For Harry to stand in the dock and assert that he was innocent when the evidence proved to demonstration that he was guilty, revealed a depth of moral depravity that was most painful in one so young and so well brought up.

The judge read him a lecture that might have moved a heart of stone and which certainly brought tears into the eyes of some of the jurymen. An offence against property is, in the eyes of English law, one of the greatest and most terrible of all crimes. A man may half starve his children and nearly batter his wife to death, and the chances are he may get off with a fine or even with a reprimand. But trespass against property, touch its sacred rights even with the tip of your little finger, and no fine will atone for the offence. A bagged pheasant or a trapped hare cannot be paid for with gold.

Harry did not expect a light sentence. He knew that forgery was not an ordinary crime, that it struck at the roots of commercial life and probity, and that to deal leniently with it would be to undermine the very foundations on which were built our business relationships. The judge pointed out all this with great cogency and force. Nevertheless, the fact that this was a first offence, that up to this time

Harry had borne a good character—except that on one occasion he had savagely attacked the vicar's son—were points that had to be considered in his favour.

Two years' imprisonment with hard labour was the sentence pronounced, and no one thought it was a whit too heavy. Indeed, most people thought that the prisoner had every reason to congratulate himself on getting off so lightly.

Harry heard the sentence unmoved. On the whole it was a shorter term than he had expected; but he was in no mood to concern himself about a mere question of duration. One year or ten would make little difference. The fact that, in the eyes of the law and the world, he was a criminal was the supreme thing.

He never lifted his eyes to the people who were gazing at him from all parts of the court. He saw no individual face, nevertheless he was conscious that hundreds of eyes were bent upon him. He listened as in a painful dream while the judge was pronouncing the sentence, and then hurried down the steps to the cells below, glad to escape the burning eyes of the crowd, glad of the shelter and twilight of his cell.

On the following morning the vicar walked across to Graystone Hall to have an interview with the Earl. He was admitted without delay. Lord Menheniot was in fact expecting him. The Earl looked little the worse for his illness. He was a little greyer, perhaps, but his eye was as bright and his manner as alert as ever.

“I sent to have this interview,” the vicar began, “because I feel that in some senses the best interests of the parish are at stake.”

"Really," said the Earl dryly.

"Well, the best interests of Graystone are, I think you will admit, wrapped up in the children, and to have set before them right examples is of the utmost importance. Young people, as you know, are very impressionable."

"That is quite true," said the Earl.

"And that being so," the vicar continued, "it scarcely seems right and proper that Mr. Robert Morton should remain as their instructor."

"But he has done no harm that I know of," the Earl answered.

"That is quite true, and in some respects it is a great pity that any man should suffer for the wrongdoing of others; but society is so constructed that it is inevitable that the innocent should suffer for the guilty."

"Yes, that appears to be so," his lordship assented slowly.

"Though in this case," the vicar went on, "I do not know that Robert Morton would suffer much through having to leave Graystone. We could give him excellent testimonials, and there would be no difficulty in his getting another school in some part of the country where he is not known. To be spoken of as the father of a convict is not a very nice thing for any man, and I am afraid that this will seriously affect the young people committed to his charge."

"Possibly that is so," assented the Earl, "and yet I really do not see how we can take action in the matter."

"I should not think of dismissing him, of course," the vicar said; "but it might be pointed out to him

that his influence amongst the young people will have suffered seriously through the conduct of his son, and it might be suggested that, under all circumstances, he might be much more useful and a great deal happier in some other part of the country where he is not known."

"You mean, in other words, that he should be politely asked to resign."

"Well," the vicar said with a smile, "of course it amounts to that, and I fancy that under all the circumstances he will raise no objection, especially if we promise to give him good references."

"Well, Melville," said the Earl, getting up and walking about the room, "it is after all more your business than mine. I have not interfered in school affairs at all; you practically run the business, and I think it best that I should keep out of the matter."

"On the contrary," said the vicar, "Mr. Morton thinks I am prejudiced against him. Possibly I am somewhat, particularly on religious grounds. You may not be aware, but practically he is an infidel; he seems to have given up all faith in Christian doctrine, and under the circumstances he does not seem to me altogether a suitable man to have in the parish."

"I don't think we have any right," said the Earl, "to interfere with a man's beliefs. My policy is to let every man believe as he likes."

"That is all right enough in ordinary matters," said the vicar; "but when the schoolmaster is expected to lead the singing in the church, and to lead the responses, and occasionally to preside at the organ, it becomes a very different matter. In such a

case it is necessary that we should have a convinced Christian, and it seems to me now we may get rid of Mr. Morton without bringing any abuse down upon our own heads."

"Very good," said the Earl; "you can tell Mr. Morton that I agree with your view of the case, and shall act with you in the matter."

"Nay, nay, I am particularly anxious that the interview should not be with me, but with you. You are on good terms with him; he comes here frequently to see you on business matters, you can open the question very much better than I can, and I should be very much relieved if you would just hint to him what our feelings are on the question."

The Earl frowned and for several minutes did not reply; he felt as though the vicar were using him as a cat's paw to pull his chestnuts out of the fire, and he rather resented being so used. The vicar noticed his hesitancy, and was quick to divine the cause.

"I can assure you, cousin," he said, speaking more familiarly than he had done, "it is not because I wish to shirk any unpleasant duty—I am the last man in the world to do that; I am simply anxious that Mr. Morton should be asked to resign in the kindest way, and that he shall not think that it is through any ill-feeling on my part."

"Well, at any rate, I will consider the matter," said the Earl; "I confess that of late I have not been altogether satisfied with him; he seems to have grown somewhat indifferent, and does not attend to his work (I am speaking, of course, of the work he does for me) with the same earnestness and zeal as he did at the beginning."

"It is the nature of servants, whether public or private, to grow indolent with the lapse of time," said the vicar.

"Possibly you are right," and the Earl turned and walked toward the window as though, as far as he was concerned, the interview was at an end.

Mr. Grant, however, had another matter on his mind that he was very anxious to talk over with his cousin. The position of Rupert was giving him considerable anxiety. As yet his son had succeeded in earning nothing, and the drain on the vicar's purse was somewhat considerable. A young man of aristocratic connections and tastes is a somewhat expensive luxury, which the vicar found to his sorrow. Moreover, he had now arrived at a marriageable age, and the vicar saw clearly enough if he could only arrange for a speedy marriage between Rupert and Monica this source of anxiety would be removed. He was, therefore, determined that, as soon as the case of Harry Morton had been disposed of, he would approach the Earl and talk the matter over seriously with him.

On the whole, Lord Menheniot was not averse from discussing the subject. Monica was no light responsibility. She had suddenly grown into a woman, and he hardly knew what to do with her. His wife, being a confirmed invalid, and unable to leave her room, was not able to give her any attention whatever; indeed, she required constant attention herself, so that the Earl felt that it would be a relief to him to see his ward safely married; and as Rupert would in all probability become in time Lord of Graystone estate, as well as the smaller

estate of Menheniot, from which he had taken his title, he was quite willing that a matrimonial alliance should be arranged between them. The only difficulty hitherto was that Monica had shown no striking preference for the vicar's son. On the contrary, she expressed herself in a way sometimes that indicated that she rather disliked him, and much preferred that he should stay away from Graystone Hall.

Lord Menheniot, however, did not attach a great deal of importance to what he termed the whim of a girl. With a very keen recollection of his own young days, he knew that girls often went by the rule of contrary; that they said with their lips what they did not mean in their hearts, and were frequently most distant with those whom they cared for the most. In fact, when a young girl was particularly fond of a man she often carefully avoided showing any preference for him. It might be so in the case of Monica. Her very indifference towards Rupert might be in appearance only; at heart she might be very fond of him.

The vicar opened the question with great diffidence.

"Now that I am here," he said, "and we are talking more or less confidentially, there is one matter that has been weighing heavily upon my mind for some time past."

"Indeed," said his lordship, returning suddenly from the window.

"Well, naturally I am more or less concerned about the position of Rupert," the vicar said. "You know that he has succeeded in getting no position yet."

"He does not appear to me to have tried very hard," the Earl said, bluntly.

"Of late I admit he has not been making very strenuous efforts," the vicar assented; "but earlier on, if you remember, he spent a very considerable time in London, and I believe did his best to get some position either as secretary to a Cabinet Minister or some subordinate position in the Diplomatic Corps. But, as you know, good positions are not always easy to get, and he has nothing else to do but to hang about the Law Courts and wait for briefs, and, as you will admit, waiting for briefs is a very trying business, especially when there are so many clever and pushing men who are ever elbowing their way in front of you."

"And for him to live at home, I presume, you find a somewhat expensive luxury," the Earl said, dryly.

"Well, the stipend is not great in the parish of Graystone."

"No, it is not great, but still it is not to be despised."

"I am not despising it, by any means," said the vicar, quickly; "still, you will admit that it is quite natural that I should be somewhat concerned about Rupert's future."

"I think that the best thing that can be done with him is to fling him overboard," said the Earl, "and let him sink or swim for himself. If he is worth saving I don't think it likely that he will be drowned."

"I cannot say I agree with you in that," returned the vicar, uneasily; "he has not been brought up to

rough it, and if he has expectations in the future of course you will agree that it is not his fault."

"Still, you know," laughed the Earl, "that those who wait for dead men's shoes are in danger of going a long time barefoot."

"I assure you," said the vicar, with a flush, "that Rupert is the last man in the world who would desire to step into your shoes; indeed, he is most anxious that you should live to a green old age."

"It is very kind of him, I am sure," the Earl returned, with a smile.

"But that is not the question, exactly," said the vicar, fidgeting in his chair; "you see, if Rupert had imagination and were clever with his pen, he might write novels as many young and briefless barristers do. But novel-writing is not at all in his way; the only thing, therefore, for him to do is to contract a suitable marriage. If he can wed a lady with means of her own he would be at once lifted above want, and all anxiety relative to ways and means would cease."

"Oh, I see what you are driving at," laughed the Earl; "but, by Jove! my cousin, you have been a long time getting to it."

"I do not like to be precipitate on any question," the vicar said, clearing his throat, and looking relieved. "I am glad, however, that we understand each other."

"You refer, of course, to an alliance between Rupert and Monica," questioned the Earl.

"Exactly; that is the point I wish to get at. Monica is turned eighteen now and is a woman. Rupert, of course, is very considerably older, and

would be from every point of view a most suitable partner for her. I think he has no vices to mention. He is strong and healthy and good-tempered in the main and fairly intelligent."

The Earl laughed. "I think, Melville," he said, "we will take all his good qualities for granted, and his bad ones also. Now, to be candid with you, I should be very pleased indeed if such an arrangement could be come to. The truth is, with Lady Menheniot a confirmed invalid and unable to take any part in the management of the house or in the care of Monica, she is somewhat of a trial to me."

"No doubt she is; she is rather adventurous for one of her position," suggested the vicar.

"Well, you see, in a certain sense she is only one remove from the ranks. Her father, as you know, began life as a working man. She has imbibed some of his extremely Radical, not to say Socialistic, opinions. She has no respect for position as position, and to be candid, she does give me not a little anxiety."

"Then, as I understand it," said the vicar, "you would be quite willing to favour to the best of your ability Rupert's suit."

"I shall not press his claims unduly, you may be quite sure about that," said the Earl; "still, I will give him every opportunity of winning her hand; and if I can say a good word in his favour, or help on the match in any legitimate way, you may rely on my doing so."

"I am sure a word from you will go a very long way," said the vicar, "especially now that young Morton has been proved to be a rogue and a forger,

and the penalty that he deserves has been meted out to him."

The Earl laughed shortly, but looked annoyed.

"There never was any real difficulty in that direction," he said; "of course as children they were thrown a great deal together; the lad has come here constantly. I don't mind saying it, I was very fond of him. I do not understand this last freak of his; it must have been a momentary aberration of the brain, because I have always found him honest and truthful."

"But there is no doubt that Monica made a great deal of him," said the vicar.

"Yes, but Monica had no thought of love," said the Earl; "she knew her position and his; a Quixotic friendship between boy and girl is not to be taken seriously. Now that it has ended so tragically for him, she will forget him as quickly as possible."

"I hope so, indeed," and the vicar rose to take his leave. For a moment or two he hesitated, then walked to the door, then paused again with his hand on the door handle and said, "If I might suggest such a thing, my cousin, you might hint to Miss Monica that it would gratify a wish of yours if she could favour Rupert's suit."

"Thank you," said the Earl, shortly, and he went and rang the bell.

For some time after the vicar's departure Lord Menheniot continued to walk up and down the room. He did not altogether like the turn the conversation had taken. He was not enamoured of the idea of dismissing Robert Morton. It was quite true that he had not been quite as attentive lately to his

duties as previously, but possibly that was due to the great trouble that had come upon him. As a teacher also he was efficient and painstaking, and it did not seem altogether right to dismiss him because of any delinquency on the part of his son. He saw that there was a certain amount of force in the vicar's contention, and it was possible that Robert Morton might be just as useful and far happier in some other part of the country, where the news of his son's forgery had not penetrated. Still, it was no light matter to deprive a man of his means of subsistence, especially when no charge of neglect of duty could be brought against him.

"It is a question I shall have to think about," he said to himself, and for two or three days he continued to think about it, without arriving at any definite conclusion.

One evening, nearly a week later, he was sitting alone in his library intent upon a magazine, when a knock came to the door, and Robert Morton was announced. The Earl rose at once to receive his steward, and, pointing to a chair, asked him to be seated.

"Now," thought the Earl, "the whole matter can come out, and if I can approach it with sufficient delicacy I will do so. If I find, however, that it is impossible I will hand it over to the vicar to do his own work."

Robert Morton looked distressed and ill at ease, as though he had something on his mind that he was anxious to get rid of."

"I am glad you have come, Morton," the Earl

said; "there are several matters I wanted to have a conversation with you about."

"I was afraid I might be intruding," Robert said, "but I am glad to hear that you wish to see me."

"The vicar and I have been talking over your relation to the church and school."

"I am glad. I wish to end it, my lord, without delay. After what has taken place I can never be happy here again. It is a great blow, and we want to bear it somewhere where we are not known."

"It seems a pity that you should suffer for your son," said the Earl, kindly.

"My lord, he is not my son." The truth was out before he was aware.

The Earl started, with a look of eager questioning in his eyes. "Not your son, did you say?"

"Yes, my lord; he is the son of my sister."

CHAPTER XII.

THE WAY OF DECEIT.

How easy it is to philosophise, or, more correctly, to platitudinise on the importance of little things. A single word said or left unsaid may change the whole course of a life or of many lives. When Robert Morton walked to Graystone Hall to see the Earl, he had no intention of telling him that Harry was not his son. It was not a matter, as far as he knew, that concerned the owner of Graystone or any one else. He was surprised when the Earl manifested considerable interest in the subject, and pressed him for the place and date of Harry's birth.

Lord Menheniot was not an inquisitive man and manifested very little interest in other people's affairs. It was a cause of complaint in the county that he kept himself so much to himself—that he entertained so little and took such small interest in local and imperial politics. It was known, of course, that his wife was a chronic invalid and never saw any one except her attendants, but in the judgment of many people that was not a sufficient excuse for his living almost the life of a recluse.

Robert Morton had never known him manifest such intense curiosity before.

"You say that Harry is your sister's son?" the Earl questioned, with a curious inflection in

his voice, after Robert had given some further particulars.

"He is, my lord; but I can assure you I have never made any difference in my treatment of him on that account."

"I can quite believe you, Morton."

"As a matter of fact, I have spent more on him than on any of my own children," Robert went on, "and both myself and my wife have been anxious that he should never know that he was only my nephew."

"And you say that his mother's name was Ellen?" the Earl questioned, "and that he was born in London?"

"That is so, my lord," Robert answered, wondering more than ever at his lordship's curiosity, and yet drawn out by that very curiosity to enter more fully into details.

"You see, it was this way. My sister Ellen was an exceedingly pretty girl and a lovely singer, and these two gifts—beauty and a good voice—were in my judgment her ruin."

"Why so, Morton?" the Earl asked eagerly.

"Well, you see, she received so much flattery that it turned her head. She grew tired of our village life and pined for more excitement. Then nothing would do for her but she must go to London. We lost sight of her then for some time, then we heard she had gone on the operatic stage. This nearly killed my mother. My father had died some time previously."

"Why should the fact of her going on the stage affect your mother so much?" the Earl questioned.

“ Well, sir, five-and-twenty years ago, in our remote part of the country, theatres were looked upon as the last resort of abandoned men and women. We all of us gave up Ellen as utterly lost. We never communicated with her, or she with us. My mother never mentioned her name except to pray for her, and if that did no good to Ellen it was a sort of relief to my mother.”

“ Exactly ; but go on, Morton.”

“ I am afraid, sir, I am tiring you with these details.”

“ Not a bit of it. I am quite interested.”

“ It is kind of you to say so, but there is not much more to tell. One day there came a little box of bride’s cake and a brief letter announcing that she was married to a Mr. William Blunt, a gentleman of private means, and that she was not going on the stage any more. Well, we all hoped for the best, though my mother, who died soon after, was never satisfied. A year or so later my sister Jane got a letter from Ellen saying she was ill and begging her to come and see her, as her husband had been called away to Canada on business matters and would not be back for several weeks. Well, Jane started off post-haste, and found her in a nice little house in a quiet street somewhere in Holloway.”

“ Yes,” questioned the Earl, seeing that Robert paused, with a far-away look in his eyes.

“ Well, Jane remained a fortnight, during which time Harry was born, and poor Ellen died and was buried.”

“ And the husband ? ” the Earl questioned.

Robert gave a short harsh laugh. “ Oh, the

husband? What would you expect? He never turned up, and as far as I know has never been heard of to this day."

"But he may have been an honourable man, nevertheless."

Robert laughed again in the same hard way. "He may have been, of course, but men of means who marry poor girls from the country, and never make themselves known to the girl's relatives, and have no relatives of their own, may generally be taken for what they are worth, and that, in my judgment, is not much."

"Then you doubt the legality of the marriage?" the Earl questioned.

"Oh, no; in one sense the marriage was legal enough. I have the certificate somewhere. They were married by special licence. But who William Blunt was Heaven only knows."

"Oh, I see, you think Blunt was an assumed name."

"No doubt of it, sir. It is easy in a place like London for a man to change his name and impose on confiding women. He may be Mr. Jones in Holloway, and Mr. Brown in Brixton; Mr. Smith in Bayswater, and Mr. Robinson in Stratford."

"So you made no effort to find Harry's father?"

"Not likely, my lord. Why should we? We made the best of it. When my sister Jane went out to China to marry a poor fanatic of a missionary, to whom she was engaged, my wife and I took the child and brought him up as our own, and this is the end of it."

"It is very sad," the Earl said, reflectively.

“And yet was anything better to be expected, my Lord? Taints of blood will come to the surface sooner or later. His mother a poor giddy woman, his father a deceiver: was it likely the child would turn out a saint?”

Robert Morton could generally wax eloquent when he got on to moral themes. He had so often discussed with his neighbours of late “poor Harry’s terrible fall” that the *rôle* of purist had come quite easy to him. Indeed, he was getting by almost imperceptible stages to believe that Harry was the guilty party after all. Just as people may tell a lie so often that in the end they accept it as a truth, so Robert, constantly assuming and hearing it assumed that Harry was a forger, began to accept it as a fact, and in some measure to resent the disgrace that he had brought upon the family.

Outwardly Robert had never been so religious as during the last few months, and never so emphatic when inculcating moral truths into the minds of the children; never did he denounce wrong-doing with so much earnestness or extol virtue with such persuasive eloquence.

For several minutes neither he nor the Earl spoke again. Robert looked at his employer furtively out of the corners of his eyes, and wondered again why he should be so interested in the story he had just told him. Did he know anything, or was it merely another evidence of his old liking for Harry?

The Earl was the first to break the silence. “Do you know, ‘Morton,’ he said, slowly, “that I sometimes wonder if the lad has not been wrongly condemned?”

Robert flushed and turned uneasily in his chair. "It—it would be an infinite relief to think so," he said. "But—but the evidence was so circumstantial."

"Yes, that is true," the Earl answered; "I have examined the chain of evidence bit by bit, link by link, and I can discover no flaw anywhere. And yet there are times when I do not feel altogether satisfied."

"You have expressed my position to a dot," Robert said after a long pause; "but in my case I have assumed it arose from a natural affection for the boy, but in your case, my lord——"

"I have always liked the lad," the Earl interposed. And then he arose abruptly from his chair as though to intimate that the interview was at an end. "I shall see you again, of course, before you leave," he added, "and I sincerely trust that in your new line of life you will be successful."

"It will be a relief in any case, both for myself and the children, to get away where we are not known. It has been a terrible trouble to us, as you may imagine."

"Yes, I can fully sympathise with you, and am not at all surprised at your decision to leave Graystone."

Robert made his way back through the park in a very sober mood. Hitherto he had played his cards with considerable skill, but success had brought him very little satisfaction. Every now and then a fit of compunction, like a cold wave, swept over him and left him nerveless and depressed.

It was easy to sneer at conscience and hold up

what he called "pious platitudes" to ridicule, but conscience could be a very irritating companion, and even platitudes embodied very stubborn facts.

Outwardly he had gained much by flinging morality to the winds. He had gained freedom. He was no longer dependent on the Earl or on his cousin the vicar. He had gained self-confidence; he was not so mistrustful of his own abilities as he used to be. He had gained a knowledge of certain phases of commercial life that were unknown to him before, and, more than all, he had gained comparative wealth. In the short space of three months he had netted a little fortune, and all through stolen money. And what had he lost? Outwardly nothing. His reputation was as good as ever it was, his credit was better. Looking at the matter cursorily he had every reason to congratulate himself. What a relief it was not to be compelled to look at every shilling he spent, to have no fear of dunning letters, to be able to run up to town whenever he felt disposed, to look forward to a speedy escape from the drudgery of the school-house.

"I ought to be as happy as the birds," he said to himself as he walked slowly homeward through the twilight, and could he have kept his thoughts always in the groove we have indicated it is possible he would have been fairly content.

But in this respect he was not his own master. His thoughts persisted in going their own way in spite of him. He tried very resolutely to reflect only on his gains; but every now and then the sense of a great loss stole over him. He had lost the most precious of all possessions—his self-respect.

Try as he would to flatter himself that he was a very clever man, that he was a born financier and strategist, with much else of the same order, he invariably slid down the bank into the chill waters of self-contempt. He knew that he was a hypocrite, a traitor, a coward, a cad. The world might judge him very differently. His wife might still look up to him and trust him implicitly. His children might hold his name in reverence. But there was no hiding the truth from himself. He knew he was deserving of the contempt of every honest and self-respecting man.

The clear, honest eyes of Madge and Dora and Bob seemed sometimes to burn into his very soul. Their presence in the room where he was became at times a positive pain to him. He spent less time in their company than ever before. He was in terror lest their innocent eyes should read the secret of his guilt.

On the day before his departure from Graystone he paid a final visit to the Earl. It was early in October, a warm, windless day, as though summer were loth to yield her hold upon the land. A silvery, luminous haze lay upon the park and fields, and almost shut out the distant range of hills.

"I shall miss the country," he said, with a little sigh. "There will be nothing like this in London."

And indeed the prospect in its way was as fair as anything England could show.

On the terrace in front of the hall he came upon Monica and Rupert Grant walking slowly to and fro. Monica instantly left Rupert's side and ran up and spoke to him. She rather liked the grave

schoolmaster and steward, and since this great trouble had overtaken him her heart had gone out to him in genuine sympathy.

He was not too old a man to be touched by girlish beauty. Her hair shone like gold to-day, washed as it was in the autumn sunshine, and the warm colour that came suddenly to her cheeks as she caught sight of him greatly enhanced her beauty.

"I don't wonder young Grant is fond of her," Robert Morton reflected. "One does not see so pretty a girl every day," and he sighed again. "It is very delightful to be young and—and in love."

Monica's voice broke in upon his reflections like a strain of music.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Morton; isn't it a lovely day?"

"It is indeed, Miss Monica."

"And you are actually going to leave Graystone, I am told."

"Yes, I came up to say good-bye to the Earl."

"I am so sorry," she said, looking away across the park. "There will be nothing left to remind one of the old days soon."

"Let us hope that the new days will be better," he said, with a feeble smile.

"Oh, I hate to think of the future," she answered. "Winter will be upon us directly."

He did not reply for a moment. He thought of the winter of life that was so surely overtaking him. When he spoke again it was on an entirely different subject.

Lord Menheniot received him with great friendliness.

"So you are going away to-morrow?" he questioned.

"Yes, most of our goods have been sent away already; but I wanted a final word before I left."

The Earl turned towards him in a listening attitude.

"It was about the stolen money I wished to speak," Robert said, shifting uneasily in his chair. "I should feel very much more satisfied if you would allow me to refund the money, as I am able."

"Why so?"

"Well, it may be mere sentiment; but it is not merely the fact of the forgery that impresses me, but the fact that he has robbed you."

"Still, you are not responsible for that."

"That is quite true, my lord, and yet I feel very sensitive on the matter. When I took him as a baby I received a hundred pounds with him, which belonged to his mother. Unfortunately I made a bad investment of the money and lost it all, but that is nothing to the point; what I feel is that you are £250 out of pocket through—through him."

"But he is not your son."

"But he has been as a son to me. I have had his upbringing and I did my best to train him in right ways, and if I failed it was not for want of trying. Anyhow, I feel as though I were responsible."

"Well?" the Earl questioned.

"Well, my lord, I have succeeded by dint of much economy in saving £50, which I would let you have gladly as a first instalment of the amount."

"My dear sir," the Earl said, rising suddenly to his feet, "the sentiments you have expressed do you

infinite credit. They do, indeed, and I shall think all the better of you for what you have said, but I could not allow such a thing for a moment."

"I would much rather you did," Robert said, in tones of well-feigned emotion.

The Earl laughed a short dry laugh. "I can assure you it is quite impossible," he said. "I thank you for the offer. As I said before it does you great credit, but now let us drop the subject and not refer to it again. I shall always think of you as a very generous and disinterested man."

Robert winced and the colour very perceptibly deepened in his cheeks, and a few minutes later he took his leave.

As he walked home through the park he felt as though he had left another remnant of his manhood behind him. He had landed himself in such a position that anything like sincerity was absolutely impossible. By the very necessities of the case his life from day to day had to be a studied and organised deceit and falsehood. "Good heavens, what a contemptible hypocrite I have become!" he said to himself, and he laughed a low, gurgling laugh.

After a few moments he raised his hat and squared his shoulders. "I don't suppose I'm a bit worse than other people," he reflected. "We are all hypocrites in these days—nothing else pays. But it requires cleverness to do the thing successfully," and he laughed again.

On the following morning he and his family took train for London.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FAMILY ARRANGEMENT.

LORD MENHENIOT was in trouble—that was clear to everyone who came into contact with him. What the trouble was no one knew, and he was not the kind of man to take people into his confidence. The surprising thing was, however, that the trouble, whatever it might be, appeared to date from the going away of Robert Morton. Why the loss of the schoolmaster should affect him no one could understand; and yet if it was not that, what else could it be? His wife was no worse than she had been for years. Monica had given over playing “Tom-boy” and shocking the vicar and his wife and other respectable people, and had settled down into a painfully quiet and docile young lady. His health was quite re-established, and his doctor anticipated no further trouble on that score provided he took care of himself. Yet, notwithstanding all this, he was not his usual self. When he was not absent-minded he was irritable and cross.

A week after Robert Morton’s departure he took a journey into Devonshire and remained away several days. The vicar wondered, and scented a mystery. Robert Morton hailed from some obscure part of Devonshire. The Earl began to show signs of irritability directly the schoolmaster left

Graystone. Could there be any connection between the two?

The Earl appeared to be in no better frame of mind on his return. In fact, he seemed more perturbed than before. After remaining at home a few days he went off to London, and, instead of returning the same evening, spent nearly a week there. This, if it did not interest any one else, perplexed the vicar a good deal. Parliament was not sitting at the time, Mayfair was empty; consequently there seemed no earthly reason why he should spend nearly a week in a place that he so cordially disliked.

On his return from London he shut himself mostly in his own room, and was rarely seen except at meal times. The vicar made two distinct and determined attempts to secure an interview with him, but without success.

“Will you ask Mr. Grant to call again, and tell him I am very much engaged just now?”

This was the word sent on each occasion, and the vicar did not like it. In fact, he strongly resented it, and would very much have liked an opportunity of showing the Earl that he was not at all pleased.

Rupert shared his father's anxiety. He had expected everything to go on swimmingly between himself and Monica, instead of which his path seemed more completely blocked than ever. Evidently the Earl had said nothing to Monica about the matter, and, instead of smoothing the way for him to that young lady's hand and heart, he did not even invite him across to dinner, or show the slightest interest in his welfare.

Thrown upon his own resources, Rupert made

almost daily efforts to gain access to Monica's presence, but generally without success. Monica seemed in danger of becoming almost as great a recluse as her guardian. Rupert watched for her in vain out of doors. The long rambles in which she used to take such a delight were discontinued. Her pony went unsaddled from week's end to week's end. Even her favourite flower-beds received little or no attention from her.

Rupert wondered if she was really fretting over the fate of Harry Morton, and grew uneasy at the thought. On the few occasions, however, when he succeeded in getting an interview with her she was more than usually gracious with him. Her old habit of snubbing and criticising him had given place to something entirely different. Instead of talking herself, she would listen quietly while he talked, and instead of contradicting him she assented to nearly everything he said.

But this condition of passivity was as little to his liking as the other. He feared that she assented to what he said simply because she had not heard what he had been talking about, and did not contradict and criticise because she felt no interest in what he had been saying. This was a very humiliating reflection, and yet he was unable to escape it.

In reality the only thing he really cared for was Monica's money, and for the sake of her money he was quite prepared to take her and run all risks. He liked her after a fashion. She was undeniably pretty and fresh and wholesome, and had he been a young fellow of twenty-one, and Monica the first

pretty girl that had come his way, he would no doubt have fallen madly in love with her.

But he was not twenty-one, and Monica's was not the first pretty face he had seen; consequently his passion was not beyond his control, nor was his desire that such affection as he had should be reciprocated of a very passionate kind.

Life was a compromise. No man could get all he wished. A judicious blend was perhaps in the long run the most satisfactory and satisfying. An overmastering and overwhelming love was no doubt a very grand thing, and a young man of twenty would perhaps put it before everything else. But he had lived long enough to see that love was not everything. In the rough-and-tumble of life many things were needed, and not the least of them gold.

Monica had money and plenty of it, and though he might never love her madly he could love her quite sufficiently. She might love him in the same calm, undemonstrative way; and from what he had heard such love was even more likely to survive the wear and tear of life than the more passionate kind.

His wooing, therefore, would be of a strictly business-like and matter-of-fact kind; on reflection he was not quite sure—supposing that Monica had lost her heart to Harry Morton—that it might not work out to his advantage. That little romance, if romance it was, was for ever at an end now. If she were ever in love with Harry she would have quite realised by this time that such love was utterly hopeless. Hence if she married at all it would be purely a family arrangement, and that was just where his chance came in.

So after a few weeks Rupert plucked up his courage, and began to take a more hopeful view of the situation. He would have to make himself as agreeable as possible to Monica, to humour her at every possible opportunity, and by-and-by, when the Earl suggested to her, as he doubtless would, that such an alliance would be a desirable arrangement, she would no doubt fall in with his wishes and the matter would be settled.

In adopting this view Rupert showed considerable knowledge of human nature. As a matter of fact, Monica was in such a condition of mind that she did not much care what happened to her. If Lord Menheniot had told her to get ready to marry Rupert Grant the following week she would have done so. She was in the mood to make a martyr of herself.

For the moment nothing seemed worth troubling about or contending for. She had awakened to the fact that Harry Morton had been everything in the world to her; that all the romance of her life had been weaved round his name; that in all her castles he had been lord and king. Now the world seemed empty. She had nothing to live for or care for. The entire outlook was prosaic and commonplace—a dreary landscape without colour or sunshine or warmth.

Of course, she would have to live out her life as other people did and make the best of it. There were duties to be done, burdens to be carried, battles to be fought. But the romance was gone. The one thing that glorified everything else had suffered everlasting eclipse; nothing could ever lift the shadow.

It was a month after Robert Morton had taken his departure that the Earl called Monica one afternoon into his study. Whatever might be the nature of the problem that had vexed him during the last four weeks he had evidently solved it. The look of perplexity and indecision had gone from his eyes, and had given place to an expression of quiet determination. After a long battle with himself he had at last made up his mind, and he looked all the more cheerful in consequence.

"You are not busy this afternoon, are you, Monica?" he asked deferentially.

"Not at all. I am quite at your service. Do you want some more letters written?"

"Well, not to-day, thank you. The truth is I wanted to have a little talk with you."

"Oh, I shall be delighted, for the house has been terribly quiet lately."

"That is true, Monica; I am sure you must find it terribly dull. I often feel quite sorry for you, and yet what can I do? With Lady Menheniot in the condition she is in it is impossible to have company here; for the same reason we cannot travel——"

"Please, guardy, I am not complaining," she interposed. "I am not really. I am just as happy here as I should be anywhere else, and I don't want to travel or go into society, I really don't."

"Still, at present I am afraid your life is somewhat aimless," he said, after a pause, "and that cannot be good, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it is aimless," she said, reflectively. "There doesn't seem much to live for, does there? But that's generally the case with girls,

isn't it? I really don't see what good we are in the world—I mean girls like me. If I were a man I could do something.”

“Could you?” he said, with a smile; “I’m not sure of that. There are plenty of men who find ‘doing something’—except mischief—utterly beyond their powers.”

“Oh, yes, that may be, but they’ve no grit in them. I’ve no patience with young men who idle away their life at home.”

“But if all the situations are filled?” he questioned, with a smile.

“Then I’d make others.”

“I’m afraid, Monica, that’s not so easy as you imagine.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think it is a horrible misfortune to be born rich, and worse still to be born with expectations.”

“Of whom are you thinking, Monica?”

“Of no one in particular,” she answered, with averted eyes; “only it seems to me that nearly all the people who do any real good in the world are those who start with nothing. It’s just the fact that I have money that keeps me from being a milliner or a dressmaker, and condemns me to idleness and uselessness.”

“I’m afraid you’re getting pessimistic, Monica. You’ve been left too much alone lately.”

“Oh, no, I’ve not. I like being alone. Bad as one’s own company is, it is much better than most people’s.”

“Not if you brood and grow morbid and get false and distorted views of life,”

She raised her eyebrows and laughed. "I thought I was getting quite correct views of life," she answered. "Isn't it true that lots of money or great expectations are bad for young people?"

"Not necessarily," he answered. "It all depends on what kind of young people they are. Some of our greatest men—statesmen and others—were born rich and with great expectations."

"But look at the greater number of poor who have made their mark in the world. Think of a man like Mr. Edison, for instance."

"I have no wish to unduly discount your argument, Monica," the Earl said, with a smile, "but poverty is not always a spur to people, even when they have ability and excellent opportunities. The number of wrecks is appalling."

"I know whom you are thinking of," she said, with a little gasp; "you are thinking of Harry Morton."

"Alas! he is only one of the many," the Earl answered, with averted eyes.

"You mean that there are crowds of people more sinned against than sinning?"

"No, Monica, I did not mean that. I meant simply that poverty often creates temptations that, shall I say, are almost irresistible."

"Then you still believe that Harry Morton forged that cheque."

"I'm bound to believe it," he answered, looking distressed. "There was no one else who could have done it."

"Isn't that what the newspapers call begging the whole question?" she asked, with a pathetic smile.

The Earl walked to the window and did not answer for some time. Then, facing suddenly round, he said, "It was not for this I wished to see you this afternoon, Monica. Our conversation has taken quite an unexpected turn."

"Indeed?" And she waited for him to go on.

"We commenced by talking about aims in life," he said, after an awkward pause.

"And suggested that I was quite innocent of anything of the kind," she said, with a pout.

"Did I? Well, that was rude of me. Perhaps also I was mistaken——"

"Oh, no, you were quite right," she interrupted.

"I'm as innocent of aims as the law is of justice."

"You are becoming cynical, Monica; but let that pass."

"No, I'm not, but I'm serious."

"I am glad to hear you say so; and taking it for granted, would it not be possible for you to have an aim that should be quite legitimate and worthy, and which would give dignity and meaning to all your future conduct?"

Monica looked up with a little start, and wondered what the Earl was driving at.

"Please go on," she said, with a little laugh, "for I am really curious to know what you are going to propound."

"Well," he said, shifting about in an uncomfortable way, "is it an unworthy ambition to be a good man's wife, to be the light and inspiration of a home?"

"Why do you ask that question?" she said, sharply.

"Well, I have thought that if some arrangement could be come to that would give definiteness to your future, that would give you something to look forward to, it might very much increase your happiness."

"You want to dispose of me, do you?" she said, half-jestingly, half-seriously; "tired of the responsibility, eh, guardy? Well, I suppose I have been a lot of trouble to you."

"No, no, my child. In many ways you have been a great comfort to me. But, with Lady Menheniot in the state she is in, this is but a gloomy place for you; and if I could see you happily married, though I should miss you terribly, I should at the same time rejoice."

"I'll do anything you wish," she said, with a touch of recklessness in her tone. "I suppose you know of some one who is willing to take me off your hands."

"Rupert will come into possession of Graystone some day," the Earl said, uneasily.

"I had a guess that that was the egg that was being hatched," she answered, a little bitterly. "Well, I don't know that it matters much so long as he knows the truth beforehand."

"What do you refer to?" he questioned.

"That it is a purely business affair, arranged for family and state reasons, and that anything like love is not in the reckoning."

"But you like Rupert?" he questioned, raising his eyebrows.

"I neither like him nor dislike him," she answered. "If I have to marry somebody he will do as well as anyone else."

"Rupert is very fond of you," he replied, "and I am sure on the whole he is an excellent fellow."

"Oh, let us not discuss his qualities, guardy, or we might quarrel," she said, the tears rising suddenly to her eyes. "When do you want the affair to come off?"

"My child, you misunderstand me altogether," he answered, in a tone of concern. "There is plenty of time yet. I was only suggesting that if you and Rupert were engaged you would have something to look forward to and live for. Rupert is very anxious on the question."

"And so he has got you to intercede for him?"

"Well, no, not exactly. The matter has been in my mind for a long time past."

"I wonder Rupert has not spoken to me."

"I fear you have given him very little opportunity, Monica. You have been a good deal of a recluse lately."

"I think I'll go and look for him and tell him that everything has been arranged," she said, with trembling lip.

"Surely, Monica——"

"Why not?" she said, hotly. "Oh, I don't mind a bit. It's a pure matter of business, and there can be no impropriety in telling him that we've talked the matter over and settled everything."

"But surely——"

"I can assure you I'm most obedient," and she went and pulled open the door, and passed out into the hall, where she came face to face with Rupert Grant.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FAMILY ARRANGEMENT.

MONICA'S eyes were bright with unshed tears ; her lips were white and trembling ; her heart was throbbing violently. She had put the worst possible construction on Lord Menheniot's words. She was angrier with him than she had ever been in her life before. She wondered now that she had kept so cool in his presence. Her wounded pride had turned to recklessness. She would have welcomed an earthquake that would have swallowed her up and all Graystone along with her.

"So he's tired of me, is he?" she thought bitterly ; "thinks I'm a burden and in the way ; wants to get me married and off his hands. God pity all orphans !" and her eyes threatened to run over.

Her first impulse was to rush into Rupert's arms and tell him everything—ask his protection and suggest that he should marry her right off. But second thoughts came to her rescue. "Good afternoon, Rupert," she said, making a great effort to steady her voice ; "your cousin is in his study," and, rushing upstairs, she went at once to her own room and locked the door behind her.

Girl-like—for she was only a girl yet—she flung herself on the bed and gave way to a violent paroxysm of weeping.

It seemed to her as if everything was wrong. Life was a cheat from beginning to end. Nothing happened as one desired; all the world was at cross-purposes.

"Oh, I wish I were dead," she moaned. "Why was I allowed to live when father and mother were not allowed to live to take care of me? Oh, I do believe I hate everything and everybody."

She got up at length and bathed her face in cold water; but she could not cool the raging fire in her heart.

Then her thoughts turned to Harry Morton, and she sat down in an easy-chair and cried again. Yet they were not tears of anger now, but tears of pity.

"Poor Harry," she moaned, "my sufferings are nothing to his. Perhaps he will die. Oh, I hope he will. It's far better that he should die than live disgraced, and I'd rather think of him sleeping quietly and untroubled in his grave than suffering as he is doing. Oh, I wish that he could die and that I could die with him, then there would be rest and peace for us both," and she wrung her soft white hands together, and her tears flowed afresh.

"But there's no dying," she went on, after a long pause. "People can never die when they want to. I shall live to be a hundred, I expect, just because I don't want to live at all. Oh dear, I wonder what I had better do," and she knitted her brows, and a look of perplexity came into her bright, tearful eyes.

"I shall have to live out my life somehow," she reflected, after a long pause. "And I suppose I shall have to marry somebody—that seems about all

that girls are for—we are all slaves, and there is no escaping. Guardy has set his heart on Rupert, that's clear, and I suppose I shall have to give in. Things will be terribly uncomfortable if I don't. I might resist and fight and protest, but what would be the use? I'm only a girl, and girls have always to give way in the end. It's the way of the world."

And she got up and began to pace up and down the room.

"Of course, I shall never see Harry again," she went on. "The fact that I know he is innocent can make no difference. Nobody else believes in him. He will be an outcast to the end. I expect he will go abroad and change his name, and try to forget and hope to be forgotten. Perhaps I shall forget him in time, perhaps I shall—but, oh no, I don't want to forget him," and the tears welled up into her eyes again.

Meanwhile Rupert and the Earl were having a confabulation below.

"I've done all I can for you in this matter and all I intend to do," the Earl said, in a tone that had in it a shade of irritation.

"But she keeps me at such an infernal distance," Rupert replied petulantly.

"I thought she was very civil to you."

"Oh yes, she is all that; and of late she has been as docile as a kitten, but hang it, a fellow can't make love when she meets you in that cold-blooded way."

"But you don't expect all the warmth to be on her side, surely?"

"No, I don't expect that either, but I tell you candidly I don't make any headway with her."

"Well, perhaps you will, now that she knows what my wishes are in the matter."

"Did she raise any objection?"

"None whatever."

"Didn't try to take the bit between her teeth and bolt?"

"No, she seemed to look at the matter in a common-sense way."

Rupert looked relieved and showed his teeth, which means that he tried to smile.

"And you think she'll fall into my arms?"

"No, I don't. She is not the kind of girl to fall into your arms. Whatever kind of fool you make of yourself before her, don't play the sentimental fool."

"My dear sir——"

The Earl laughed cynically. "I've said all I have to say on the question. Now let us change the subject."

Rupert bit his lip, and a few minutes later took his departure.

It was not until nearly a week later that Rupert got an opportunity of broaching the matter to Monica. She was alone in the drawing-room when he was announced. She was paler than usual, but she never looked prettier, and Rupert fancied that he had never seen her dressed with such perfect taste.

"By jove," was his thought, "she is not a girl that any fellow need feel ashamed of. It's hardly to be expected that she will know her way about like—like—well, like girls brought up in the city. But she'll soon get over her country ways, and besides, that fortune of hers atones for everything."

Monica greeted him very cordially, and if her smile was sadder than usual it only added to her many charms.

"I hope you are well, Monica," Rupert said, trying to throw a note of solicitude into his voice. "You look a little pale—by jove you do."

"I'm very well, Rupert, thank you. Won't you sit down?"

"I will with pleasure. I'm awfully pleased to find you disengaged for once."

"Oh, I'm often disengaged," she said, with a plaintive little laugh. "Indeed, I frequently wish that I had a good deal more to do than I have."

"You should mention the matter to my mater, Monica. She'd give you parish work to do in abundance."

"I'm afraid I'm not fond of parish work—at least such parish work as your mother indulges in."

"She does go it rather strong, doesn't she? But you see she's built that way. It's an awful good thing that everybody is not made alike."

"Yes, I suppose so. The world's dull enough as it is."

"By jove, you are right, Monica. Yes; this is an awful dull place, don't you think so, now?"

"It is dull. You see there are so many dull people in it."

Rupert looked at her suspiciously, then laughed in a feeble, half-hearted way. He was never quite certain if Monica was sincere or whether she was only poking fun at him.

He began to rack his brains for something to say next. It would never do to let the conversation

taper off into silence. Besides, he had come across on purpose to have it out with Monica. He had prepared a little speech if he could only get an opportunity to deliver it. But somehow he got no chance to begin it. The conversation always took the wrong turn.

"You did not mean that last remark of yours to be personal, of course, Monica," he blurted out, at length; "though, by jove, I do believe I'm dull when I'm with you. But, you see, it's this way——"

"Oh, don't apologise, Rupert," Monica interposed, with a mischievous look in her eyes. "Nobody can help being himself, you know."

"No, of course not—that is—but really, Monica, I don't quite see what you are driving at. If you mean that——"

"Oh, I mean nothing in particular," she said, laughing.

"But I mean a great deal, Monica. I'm in deadly earnest. You might see that if you only took the trouble to look at me."

"And what's made you so much in earnest all at once? Have you a case coming on at the next assizes?"

"Unfortunately, no. Briefs, somehow, don't come my way. Not that I worry myself much about that. You see, Nature or Providence, or whatever it may be, never intended me to be a working barrister."

"And have you discovered yet what Nature did intend you to be?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. The fact is, Monica, I've had quite an inspiration, if one may so speak. I feel that my place is here—here with my cousin and—and you."

“Indeed?”

The single word chilled Rupert like a blast of east wind. Somehow he never got near the point but she switched him off again or chilled him with silence.

He rose from his chair and took two or three turns round the room. When he was by himself, proposing seemed the easiest thing in the world. He could think then of a hundred things to say. He could compose love-speeches by the yard. But directly he got into Monica's presence all his wits seemed to evaporate. He felt stupid and awkward, and had scarcely a word to say for himself.

He was not lacking in courage, however, and a certain doggedness of disposition stood him in good stead. After a minute or two he came back and sat down again.

“Look here, Monica,” he said, desperately; “I want to have a serious talk with you—I do indeed.”

“Very good, Rupert,” she answered, without lifting her eyes. “I am all attention.”

“But the mischief is, Monica, that you never seem interested in me,” he answered, with a touch of asperity in his tone.

“I do not know why you should say that,” she answered; “I do not think that I have shown myself to be in any way disagreeable.”

“No, not disagreeable. I would not suggest that for a moment, but you must surely know what has been in my mind and heart for a very long time.”

She raised her eyes slowly to his and smiled.

“Do you credit me with having the gift of second sight?” she answered. “How should I know of what you are thinking?”

"My actions should surely speak plainly enough," he said; "I have shown you in a hundred ways how deeply I am interested in you."

"I am much obliged, I am sure, for your solicitude," she answered, in the same quiet, half-bantering tone.

"Solicitude is not the right word, Monica; has not my cousin talked to you on a matter that very nearly relates to my happiness, if it does not relate to yours?"

"Yes, to be quite frank, he has spoken to me."

"Well, that is the very matter that I came across to talk to you about this afternoon."

She looked at him again and smiled.

"You have been certainly a very long time in getting to the subject," she said.

"That is just because you keep me at such a distance. Every time I try to get near the subject you shunt me off, as it were, on to some other line."

"I must be a very dreadful person indeed," she remarked, quietly. "I did not know I had such a faculty for shunting people."

"Oh, when you like you can be as cold as an iceberg," he answered; "and you must know by this time that my heart is on fire with love for you."

"Don't tell lies, Rupert," she said, with a smile; "you know that that is pure exaggeration."

"Oh, Monica, how can you answer me in that way? I have been pining for weeks for a smile from you. Your love is the one thing in the world that I long for, and yet you tell me flatly that you do not believe me."

"When you say that your heart is on fire with love for me, I am bound to say so. It is possible that you like me very well, as I like you, but to talk about loving me is altogether wide of the mark."

"But it is not wide of the mark," he answered, desperately. "I love you passionately, love you with my whole heart and soul."

"Oh, come, Rupert," she answered, smiling at him again; "we shall never get on if you talk to me in that way. You said just now that you wanted to talk to me seriously."

"And isn't this serious talk?" he answered.

"No, this is mere wild romance," she said.

"Then you don't believe that I care for you in the least?" he answered.

"Oh, yes, I do; I think you like me very well—as well, perhaps, as you like a dozen or twenty other girls of your acquaintance."

He got up suddenly from the chair and began to pace the room again.

"I did hope that you would have received me differently from this," he said, petulantly, "for I'm dying to win your love."

"Oh, do talk sensibly, Rupert, or I shall leave you—I shall indeed."

"I do not see much use in talking to you at all," he said, lowering his voice. "I had hoped that you might feel towards me something of what I feel toward you. It has been my dream for months and months that in some way I might win your love, and that you might promise to be my wife."

"You have never asked me to be your wife yet," she said.

"How can I ask you when you do not even believe that I love you?"

"Love and marriage are not necessarily connected, I suppose," she said, a little bit cynically.

"Then do you mean to say that you would consider marriage without love?" he said, stopping suddenly in front of her with a look of astonishment in his eyes.

"As far as I understand it, marriages in these days are mere matters of family or business arrangement," she said. "The affair is frequently settled by the elders; the young folk have very little voice in the matter."

"And you believe in that method of settling the business, do you?"

"No, I can't say I do, but if it is settled for one—why, I suppose one has to obey, at least, in many instances."

"Then you mean to say that if your guardian desired that you and I should marry you would not raise any strong objection?"

"I told him when he mentioned the matter to me that I would do exactly as he wished. He expects that I shall marry somebody, and I think I would rather marry you, Rupert, than anybody else of my acquaintance. You see, if I objected to you, somebody I liked much less might be forced upon me."

"I hope there is no forcing in the question," he said, dubiously. "I am sure my cousin wishes you to do what you think best."

"Well, I have thought the matter out during the last few days, and I have come to the conclusion that if you particularly want to marry me, I do not

think I shall raise any very strong objection. It seems quite clear that my guardian is anxious to be free from the responsibility of my presence. I am only a girl; I have very few friends in the world. He says that you are good and kind, and that you would do your best to make me comfortable."

"I will devote my life to making you happy, Monica," he said, interrupting.

"No, you will never make me happy," she answered; "I shall never be happy any more. I don't expect to be; I don't know that I want to be. If I can be useful in some way that is my highest ambition."

"Oh, that is nonsense, Monica," he replied; "I will care for you so much, and watch over you so tenderly, that you will be as happy as a bird."

"I think we will not discuss that question, Rupert," she said. "It is a mere family arrangement, entered into at the wish of my guardian and yourself. If you are prepared to take me, you must take me as I am. I cannot promise to love you; I have no love to give any one."

"But why cannot you love me, Monica? I don't think I am such a bad-looking fellow," he said, with a little hesitancy.

"Oh, your looks are right enough, Rupert," she said, "but love is not dependent upon looks."

"No, not altogether, I suppose; and so I shall hope that, by being good to you and kind, and showing you how dear you are to me, in time you will love me for my own sake."

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD.

MEANWHILE Robert Morton was spreading himself like a green bay-tree. From the day he first flung morality to the winds and descended to forgery his good luck, as he termed it, had never left him. On the contrary, the more he speculated the more fortunate he appeared to become. Literally everything he touched turned into gold.

When he first went to London he took a small house in Stroud Green, and, having sold a portion of his "Bonsons," he invested the money in American railway stock which yielded him a steady 5 per cent. This he resolved to let remain, so that he might have something to fall back upon in case his good fortune deserted him. With the balance he went into partnership with his old companion and started business as outside brokers, general speculators and company promoters.

His partner had considerable knowledge of Stock Exchange matters, and for many years past had made a careful study of most questions relating to the money market and the factors which operated in the rise and fall of stocks; but through lack of capital had never done much in the way of improving his fortune.

Robert Morton, however, having a thousand or

two to spare through his fortunate speculation in "Bonsons," plunged readily into the first venture that opened. As it happened, this proved almost as fortunate a speculation as "Bonsons," and in a few days he was able to sell out again with a very considerable margin of profit.

So things went on till his good fortune became the talk of a considerable circle. People began to imagine that he was a man of very superior judgment, or else that he had more knowledge of the forces at work than most other people had. As his fortune grew Robert Morton's confidence in himself steadily increased. He made a diligent study of the share list every morning. He watched the markets with very keen interest, and showed in many ways that many of his speculations were based on very sound judgment.

After a while he joined a syndicate for the purpose of purchasing a large machinery trust. This syndicate asked the British public to subscribe £100,000 more than they gave for the trust in question, and, as the British public is very confiding in such matters, and as the prospectus set forth a number of considerations which showed that this particular machinery trust would be a very excellent investment, the capital was subscribed with great readiness; and, when the full amount of shares had been allotted, Robert Morton and his partner came out of the affair with more thousands in their pockets than they had ever possessed before.

Before Robert had been in London a year the name of Morton and Fletcher became the talk of the commercial world, and if the names of these financial

magnates sometimes penetrated into the quiet of Graystone village, no one ever dreamed of connecting Morton with the schoolmaster who had lived amongst them for so many years. That he should have developed into a financier was an idea that never occurred to any one.

The vicar read accounts of the syndicates that had been formed and the companies that had been floated by these men, but neither he nor the Earl ever imagined for a moment that it was the Morton they knew. Robert was very careful to keep his past history in the dark. He told no one the story of his schoolmastering days. He might have been on the Stock Exchange from his very childhood from anything he ever said to the contrary. He tried to shut off the past completely, to sever all connection with it; he looked back upon it as upon a bad dream.

Now and then the thought of what he had done would obtrude itself, and in his quiet moments he would remember Harry languishing somewhere in one of Her Majesty's gaols. He never attempted to communicate with him; he had not the courage, nor did he receive any missive from the silent cell in which Harry spent his days. Whether the prisoner were living or dead no one in the family knew, and, as far as appearances went, Madge was the only one who much cared. Whenever the name of Harry was brought up in the family circle it was quickly dropped. Robert avoided all allusion to him, and Mrs. Morton, seeing how it pained her husband to hear his name mentioned, was careful always to keep quiet on the subject.

So the days passed away, and Robert flourished

exceedingly. He took the chair at important gatherings of commercial men, his advice was sought where questions of finance were in dispute, he became a director of many important companies, he even feasted with the Lord Mayor of London and drank expensive wines at dinner. Indeed, it was quite astonishing to see with what rapidity this quiet schoolmaster developed into a commercial magnate.

Nor did he lose any opportunity of keeping up the excitement with which he commenced his London life. As a matter of fact, excitement was as the breath of heaven to him; he could not live without it. When he had some big speculation on foot it kept his hands and his brain busy and left no time for useless repining. He was here, there, and everywhere—in the City early in the morning and there late at night. He hated Sundays, and for the simple reason that he could not go into the City on that day, and, as a consequence, his mind was thrown back upon itself, and he was compelled to think and brood.

It is true that, in the main, conscience slept; but now and then it awoke and lifted up its voice. Occasionally, in the middle of the night, he would wake with a start, having dreamed that his baseness had been discovered and that the minions of the law were on his track. Now and then he would start fancying that he heard the voice of Harry calling to him out of the silence, and asking him to make reparation for the wrong that he had done. But on the whole he was troubled very little by memories of the past or by anticipations of the future.

Under the influence of a bottle of wine he grew

confident and philosophic. He looked upon the crowd of poor struggling fools who tried to make a living by honest methods with more contempt in his heart than pity. He remembered the time when he was troubled with ethical scruples, and when he gave ear to moral saws and old wives' fables. How far away that time seemed to him now! Though little more than a year had passed since he came to London, it seemed a dozen years at the very least. His schoolmastering days seemed little more than a memory. He had done so much, speculated so largely, taken so many risks, been at the flotation of so many companies, that it scarcely seemed possible that so much could be crowded into one short year.

And during all this time of feverish activity he had never allowed moral scruples to stand in his way. He had never hesitated to give a bribe or take one, to tell a lie or a hundred lies—and with what result? Everything that he put his hand to had prospered. Every company he had promoted had gone with a rush, and the more rotten it was the more ready the British public had been to bite at it.

Of course there were some finicking people who had condemned his conduct; there were always such people in the world who set themselves up to criticise everything. He supposed they were envious of his success, and he could afford to smile and go calmly on his way.

When his brain was a little excited with wine he smiled superciliously at questions of morality and integrity. He had tried both honesty and dishonesty, and he knew which paid the best. He would have been in poverty still had he stuck to the antiquated

notions that were still prated about in church. Men learnt all that was worth learning by experience, and his experience had taught him that moral scruples were a snare and a fraud.

His house at Stroud Green soon became too small for him. The furniture he had brought from Graystone offended his eyes; also it reminded him now and then of the past. Everything was reminiscent of a less prosperous day, and of a much too obtrusive past.

So a larger house was taken at Hampstead, with stables attached and several acres of ground surrounding it.

Madge cried when she saw the old furniture sent away to a sale-room to be disposed of to the highest bidder; it seemed almost sacrilege. Soon there would be nothing left to connect her with the dear old days, which, in spite of straits and poverty, were, as far as she was concerned, infinitely happier than the present.

As time went on she seemed to have less and less in common with the other members of the family. Mrs. Morton did her best in her feeble way to keep pace with her circumstances, and outwardly made a show of enjoying the change; but it was all a show, and a very vain one. The big house at Hampstead overawed her: she never felt at home in it. She hated to have servants waiting at the table. Their presence sent little chills down her back, while the big sleek coachman was a positive terror to her. She always wanted to say "Sir" to him, and to bring herself to call him James was the greatest struggle of her life.

Dora grew into a fashionable young lady with wonderful ease and rapidity. Everything was delightful to her—the fine house, the fine company, the big City people who occasionally came to dinner, the servants to wait upon them, the drives into Bond Street and Regent Street in their own carriage, the afternoon calls on fashionable people. It seemed almost like a page out of a story-book, and she was half-afraid sometimes that it was too good to last.

Bob had been sent to school in Winchester, and knew little of what was going on at home. That, however, did not trouble him. So long as he had plenty to eat and a reasonable time for play he was supremely happy.

Madge was the least satisfied of all. Not that she did not love large rooms and pretty things and the manifold comforts that money could buy. It was not that. It was something behind it all which she could not shape into words—a vague, undefined fear that things were not as they should be. She could not quite free herself from the feeling that they were living on a volcano that any moment might overwhelm them. She could never understand her father's sudden rise in the commercial and social world, nor why it should be synchronous with the misfortune that had overwhelmed Harry. That there was some mystery behind she felt confident, but what it was she dared not even guess.

If she had faced the question fairly she would have told herself that she had more faith in Harry than in her own father. But that was a thing she had not the courage to do; yet she knew instinctively that her father was deteriorating. He

was an altogether different man from what he was when they lived at Graystone. Then, at any rate, he did not openly sneer at religious things and treat moral truths as though they were old wives' fables.

Dora could not understand why Madge did not grow enthusiastic over their change of circumstances, and told her so. Madge smiled sadly and was silent. She could not tell Dora of the fears that haunted her, nor discuss with her the change that had come over their father. Dora was a gay little butterfly, who looked merely at the surface of things, and troubled herself neither about the past nor the future.

"I do believe, Madge, you would be content to live in that little box at Graystone again," Dora said, quite seriously.

"I should be quite content, Dora. Indeed, I was happier there than I have ever been since."

"Oh, what nonsense! We never had a penny to bless ourselves with there, and were always manœuvring to make both ends meet."

"I know that, Dora, but we were on the whole very happy, nevertheless. We had plenty to do, which was a good thing in itself, and then Harry was always like sunshine in the house."

"Ah, poor old Harry," and Dora brushed away a wilful tear, for she was quick to sorrow and quick to forget. "How foolish he was; but I am glad he was not our own brother."

"I am not," Madge said, after a pause, and a look of pain stole into her eyes. She was not so emotional as her sister, but she felt much more deeply.

"Do you know, Madge, the old life is getting to be more like a dream to me."

"And to me it is getting more and more real. This life we are living now does not seem to be right at all."

"Oh, Madge, how can you say so? Think of the drives and calls and dinners, and oh! everything, in fact."

"It may please you, Dora, but to me it is terribly empty. I'd rather be giving music-lessons to the farmer's daughters in Graystone and Minver."

"And working d'oyleys for the bazaar at the Independent chapel."

Madge blushed. "Yes," she said, "I'd rather be doing that, for I was at least doing some little good."

"You pleased the young minister, at any rate," Dora said, flippantly. "Do you know, Madge, I was afraid at one time I should be having him for my brother-in-law?"

"What nonsense, Dora!" Madge said, colouring yet more deeply.

"Well, yes, it would be nonsense, dreadful nonsense, no doubt; but all the same, I used to feel sorry for him. The way those big longing eyes of his used to follow you about was a sight to see."

"Don't be silly, Dora," Madge said, sharply. "You know very well that I scarcely ever went to his chapel, and never unless Harry was with me."

"Well, that was not his fault," Dora said, with a laugh. "You know he once asked you to join his choir."

"And I would have done so," said Madge, quickly, "but for giving offence to the vicar."

Dora laughed again in her light-hearted way. "It would have given him an opportunity if you had," she said. "But there, what would have been the use? A man with only eighty pounds a-year would never have had the courage to propose to anybody."

"It seems to me, Dora, that you think money is everything," Madge replied, seriously.

"Well, I do think it is the main thing," was the answer. "What is anybody to do without money in London? See what money has done for us."

"That is what I can't see yet," Madge answered; "but I am more than a little afraid that it will prove a greater curse than a blessing."

"Oh, get away with you, Madge. You are enough to give one a fit of the blues. You ought to marry a missionary and live on rice and charity. It's a pity we did not stay at Graystone a little longer and give that Mr. Everett a chance."

"I really cannot understand why you talk in that unreasonable way," Madge said, colouring again.

"Nay, it is you who are unreasonable," Dora answered. "I am thankful for fortune's smiles and happy in my surroundings, while you are ever sighing for the land of Egypt out of which we came."

Madge was silent again. She felt that there was a certain amount of truth in Dora's contention, and yet she could not enter into explanations.

Dora rose at length and went to the door. "Do you know," she said, "it is quite time we began to dress for dinner? Sir George Hardwood is coming again this evening."

"So I suppose. I really don't see why father should bring him here so often."

"Oh, don't you? How blind some people are!" and Dora ran laughing along the corridor.

Madge looked after her for a moment with a startled look in her eyes. "What can the child mean?" she said to herself, slowly; then she walked back into the room and dropped suddenly into a chair.

For the first time a suspicion of the truth crossed her mind. Sir George Hardwood had been constantly at the house of late. He was connected with her father in a number of business speculations, was a director of several companies, and was reputed to be enormously rich.

He came to Firdale, she presumed, to talk business with her father. That he could have any other object had never until now crossed her mind.

But Dora's laughing words had wakened a suspicion. Could it be that her father was plotting to get her married to the baronet? Sir George was stout and bald and forty—a good-looking man some people said, and an excellent catch. But Madge shrank from the bare idea.

She remembered how attentive he had always been to her, and frequently he had paid her pretty compliments, but she had thought nothing, because in her eyes he was quite an elderly man, and such an idea as matrimony never crossed her mind.

And yet—and yet——

"Oh, I must be mistaken," she said, rising to her feet; "he is old enough to be my father."

CHAPTER XVI.

A PROPOSAL.

MADGE had an ideal—most girls have—but he was the very opposite of Sir George Hardwood. Madge had spent nearly all her life in an atmosphere of books. By nature as well as by training she inclined toward an intellectual life. The talk of the City men who came to her father's house scarcely interested her at all. She wondered sometimes how her father, who had always been so bookish and reflective, could tolerate the incessant jargon of the Stock Exchange. Now and then it might be interesting to hear discussions on bulls and bears and corners and trusts and syndicates and discounts and other kindred topics, but when such subjects were the staple of conversation she was glad when dinner was over and she could escape to her own room.

Sir George Hardwood was like the rest of them. He knew horseflesh, and that was the only matter that interested him outside City affairs. He knew nothing about books, and cared less. He believed in getting all the enjoyment he could out of the world. He had no sympathy with those big-eyed dreamers who spent their lives in discussing philosophy, but who never did anything practical.

He was a practical man. He ate and drank of the best, he drove good horses and paid his servants good

wages, and helped to float companies, which, if they did no good to any one else, were a source of profit to him.

When he first saw Madge Morton he was "knocked all of a heap," as he expressed it. She belonged to an unfamiliar type. He had known crowds of women in his day, Clever, dashing, handsome, quick-witted, rich—women who knew their way about—who could ride to the hunt and discuss horseflesh and were abreast of all society ways and manners.

But Madge was not of these. There was nothing dashing about her; but she was sweet and winsome and quite unspoilt by the world, and it was this that captivated Sir George's fancy.

Robert Morton was quick to see how matters stood, and gave him every opportunity of seeing her in her home. Robert had become ambitious. Money had brought with it a desire for social advancement and distinction. He met so many titled people that he sometimes wondered if such honours would ever come his way. He was rather afraid that his wife would cut but a poor figure as Lady Morton. Nor was he absolutely certain of himself should such honour be thrust upon him. Still he would be quite prepared to run the risk. He had already begun to contribute to one of the political parties. Not because he believed in the principles of the party, but because he understood there was a better chance of social recognition and distinction in that direction.

There had been quite a batch of Knights created lately. Men by no means distinguished in science or

art or literature or even politics. But they were moneyed men. How they had made their money was a matter of no moment. They had made it, and they had contributed handsomely to the war chest of the party, and they had been rewarded accordingly. It was said that some of them dropped their h's, and were sublimely ignorant of grammar, and that their wives had been diligent students ever since of a six-penny edition of the "Manners of High Society." But never mind, they had handles to their names. Yet he recognised also that all moneyed men did not get knighted. He might be found out, and a little shiver ran down his back. If he were found out it would be all up with him. English society will tolerate anything in the world in a man except his being found out. That is the unpardonable sin. Directly a man allows himself to be found out, Society, and even Parliament, becomes righteously indignant, and prates piously about the cardinal virtues, and the necessity of being like Cæsar's wife—above suspicion.

So Robert Morton shivered occasionally. He might be found out, and then his dreams of worldly honour and distinction would vanish. But if he could not become a knight there seemed no reason why he should not become the father-in-law of a baronet, and that would be just as good. To speak of his daughter as "Lady Hardwood," would be almost equal to having his faded and meekly devoted wife spoken of as Lady Morton.

Robert saw that the Baronet was greatly taken with Madge. He came to Firdale much more frequently than any business necessity warranted,

and it was very clear that Madge was the attraction. Robert did the best he could to foster the Baronet's liking, and gave him frequent invitations to dinner, and put many opportunities in his way of seeing Madge, she all the while being quite innocent of the intentions of her father.

But on the evening following her conversation with Dora her eyes were opened. The Baronet paid her most marked attention, he followed her to the drawing-room directly after dinner, and begged her to play and sing. He paid her delicate and flattering compliments, and in a dozen little ways showed what his object was.

Madge was greatly distressed. Sir George was her father's guest, she was anxious to treat him with proper deference, and yet to give him the least encouragement to make love to her was abhorrent to every instinct of her nature. Sir George's attentions became so pointed after a while that, in order to escape, she excused herself on the plea of not feeling well, and retired to her bedroom.

But escape from a man of Sir George's temperament was not easy. He had been accustomed to have his own way all through life, his reputed wealth and family name had given him a certain vogue in society for many years. Designing mothers had set all kinds of traps for him—indeed, he was looked upon as a most eligible catch; but until he saw Madge no face had caused his heart to flutter in the smallest degree, and in many quarters he was regarded as a confirmed bachelor. That he would have any difficulty in winning Madge he did not imagine for a moment. He recognised his social

position, his family name, his considerable wealth, his beautiful house, to say nothing of his personal attractions, which, in his own eyes at any rate, were somewhat considerable. He had been so often flattered that he believed that he was a very handsome man; hence, that any sensible girl should say "No" to his proposal did not occur to him for a moment.

Madge's withdrawal from the drawing-room did not disconcert him in the least; it was just one of the little ways of women. Possibly she felt embarrassed at the attentions of one so much her social superior. Indeed, he flattered himself he had made a very good beginning. That Madge had blushed and looked uncomfortable were very good signs, in his judgment. Her shyness and apparent coldness added greatly to her charms.

He was sick of the bold, clever, designing, up-to-date women with whom he came into contact. The sweet unconsciousness of Madge captivated his fancy completely, and he was prepared to dare the anger of all the society dames he was acquainted with, and marry sweet Madge Morton forthwith.

Sir George believed in striking when the iron was hot, so on the following afternoon he drove out to Firdale again; resolving that he would have another interview with Madge, and bring the question to a direct issue. It was a beautiful day in early spring, the air was crisp and warm, the view from the Spaniard's Road as he drove along was as fine in its way as anything he had ever seen. For once the smoke did not totally obscure London, which stretched away as far as eye could reach, and formed

a picture not without very striking points of beauty. Grey and colourless the City might be, a huge wilderness of bricks and mortar, but this afternoon it was glorified by a golden haze that lay all over it, hiding all its objectionable features, shutting out its squalor, and bringing its myriad pinnacles and towers into striking relief. It was a picture the like of which is to be seen nowhere else on earth, and as Sir George drove along he could scarcely take his eyes from it.

Northward the picture was of a very different kind. Mile after mile of undulating country, clad in richest green, rolled away before him. In the dim distance was the town of St. Alban's, and farther to the west were the wooded heights of Harrow, and dimly visible were numberless towns and villages hidden away among the trees.

The baronet was not exactly artistic in his tastes, he was distinctly commercial; nevertheless, the lovely landscape stretching away by his side touched his imagination, and, coupled with the thought of Madge's fair face, which he hoped to see this afternoon, raised him to a higher plane of feeling and emotion than was common with him.

Mrs. Morton and Dora might have known that the Baronet intended to call with the special object of seeing Madge, for they very conveniently kept out of the way. As a matter of fact they had driven into the City to do some shopping, consequently when Sir George was announced, Madge was sitting in the drawing-room alone. She looked up with a glance of surprise and pain. He was the last individual in the world she expected to see on a bright,

sunshiny afternoon. Yet directly his name was mentioned she had an instinctive feeling of the reason why he had called.

Sir George came into her presence bowing and smiling, and evidently on the best of terms with himself. He was dressed in perfect taste, his well-fitting frock coat was buttoned closely round his ample figure, a beautiful orchid adorned his button-hole, his feet were encased in well-fitting patent leather boots, his bald head shone like polished ivory.

Madge advanced timidly to meet him, hardly knowing what to do or say.

"I hope I see you well this afternoon, Miss Morton," he said, bowing urbanely.

"Yes, thank you, I am very well," Madge answered, slowly.

"And your mother and Miss Dora are well, also, I hope?" he questioned.

"Yes, they are quite well, thank you; they have gone into the City."

"Indeed," and Sir George raised his eyebrows. "Then you are alone this afternoon?"

"Mother did not know you would be calling, or I am sure she would not have gone out," Madge replied.

"She would not, of course, expect me to call again so soon," he answered, "but you were not well last evening, so I thought I would drive round and inquire after your health."

"Oh, it was nothing," Madge answered, quickly; "the rooms were rather warm last night, but I recovered directly."

For a moment an awkward silence fell between

them, and they stood looking at each other with an embarrassed expression in their eyes. Sir George, however, was not easily disconcerted.

"Will you not ask me to sit down?" he said, with a smile.

"I beg your pardon," she answered, quickly; "please excuse my want of thought," and she motioned him to a seat.

"I have come specially to see you this afternoon," he said, "and so am not at all disappointed at finding you alone. As a matter of fact, I am very much pleased, as it gives me an opportunity of saying what I have been anxious to say for many weeks past."

Madge blushed and fidgeted uneasily in her chair. She felt that she was in for a bad quarter of an hour, and there appeared to be no way out. With a woman's keen intuition she knew well enough for what purpose the baronet had called, and she looked in vain for any way of escape.

Sir George was by no means shy, nor did he lack the power of utterance; but to sit there in the afternoon sunshine and make love deliberately to one who had up to the present given him little or no encouragement was a task of greater difficulty than he had imagined. Before he left home he had decided exactly what he would say; he had composed a little speech, just as he was in the habit of doing when taking the chair at a directors' meeting. He intended bringing out the strong points in his favour. He would, of course, flatter Madge's vanity, he would point out the advantages of such an alliance, and generally speaking he believed that he

would make so excellent an impression that she would fall in with his suggestions with very little delay. Yet somehow, as he sat looking at her sweet demure face, the speech that he had prepared seemed somewhat incongruous. She was not the kind of girl that cared for flattery; he was not certain that the other considerations he had intended to mention would weigh with her. She appeared to care very little for social distinction.

To shine in society was not an ambition of hers. He began to wonder whether the prospect of being Lady Harwood would have any attraction for her.

Sir George, however, was not lacking in resource, and so, after a moment's silence, he said, "I wonder, Miss Morton, if you can guess why I have called to-day."

"Why, you have told me that already," she said; "you came to inquire after my health."

"Yes, that is one reason for my calling," he answered, "but not the only reason, and, indeed, not the chief reason."

"Indeed," she questioned, without raising her eyes.

"Yes, I had a very special object in calling this afternoon. I think you will have noticed, Miss Morton, that I have paid you considerable attention lately?"

"You have come here as my father's guest, I understand," she said, somewhat coldly.

"But as the guest of your father, I have fallen in love with his daughter," he said, deliberately, and he drew his chair nearer to hers, and tried to take her hand, but she drew it away instantly, and pushed her chair a little further back.

"Please hear me out, Miss Madge," he said, with a shade of disappointment in his tone. "Be assured it is no boyish passion that I feel for you, it is a man's love that I offer, it is a man's heart that you have conquered. I know I am much older than you, but not so much older, I hope, as to form any serious obstacle. I have gone through life until now, heart-whole and fancy free as they say, but directly I saw your face I knew that my own fate was sealed. Believe me, Madge—please allow me to call you Madge—you have won my heart completely, and I shall never be happy again until you smile upon my suit." Then he waited for a moment to see what impression his words were making. Madge, with burning cheeks and eyes bent upon the floor, seemed quite unable to speak. She was struggling with herself, and trying to gain the mastery. She did not want to be rude to the baronet, and yet she wanted to say to him in a way that he could not fail to understand that his quest was thoroughly hopeless.

"May I take your silence as giving consent?" he went on. "I know my proposal will seem sudden to you, but my love is so great that I could not keep silence any longer."

"Oh, please, Sir George, don't say another word," she struggled at length to say. "I have done wrong, perhaps, in letting you say so much, but, believe me, I can never say Yes to your proposal."

"Oh, surely you do not mean that," he said, colouring to the extremity of his bald head.

"Indeed I do, Sir George," she said; "it would be wrong of me to encourage you to think that I

could ever love you; I am sure I never can. You are very kind, and you do me great honour, but please let the matter drop now, and never let it be alluded to again."

"No, no; you surely cannot mean that," he protested; "think of all that I can offer you—wealth, position, name, everything in fact that the heart of woman can desire."

She smiled at him pathetically.

"Not everything, Sir George," she said.

"What else could any man offer you?" he questioned.

"I do not know that any man could offer me more," she said; "but wealth and name and position are nothing in themselves, if love be lacking."

"But love will come," he said, desperately; "it is a plant that grows and thrives."

"It cannot grow if there is no seed for it to spring from," she answered. "Please let us drop the matter, Sir George."

"I cannot, Miss Madge," he said, "really I cannot. I have made up my mind to win you. You are the only woman I have ever seen that I have cared two straws for. Do not imagine that I have remained all these years without marrying because no one would have me. I can assure you, Miss Madge——"

"I do not doubt," she said, interrupting, "that you might easily find a wife; and what is more, you might easily find a wife fitted for your station. I am not at all fitted, Sir George. I am only a simple country maiden, and have grown up in simple homely ways. I should be happier infinitely in a

little house than in a big one. No, no ; it cannot be. I do not wish to grieve you, but be assured that my words are precisely what I mean."

"No, do not say that," he protested. "I will give you time to think it over. Perhaps I have been precipitate ; I own I have been ; my apology must be the greatness of my love. Don't shut down the question now ; let it stand open, Miss Madge."

"It is better for us both that I should not," she answered ; "I know I shall never change. I have no love to give."

"Then there is some other man in the way," he said, angrily.

"No, there is not," she answered ; "it isn't that at all. No other man ever spoke a word of love to me before ; but all the same, I know my heart, and this must be my final word."

"But it must not be your final word," he said. "I will come and see you again in a week, in a fortnight, in a month, any time you may name, but I cannot, and will not accept your word this afternoon as final ;" and rising quickly, he bade her "Good-afternoon."

That night Madge lay awake staring into the darkness, and thinking of all that the baronet had said to her, and wondering what part she would have to play in the future. Another face came up before her, the face of one whom she had not seen for a year and a half, of one who had never made love to her, of one whom she could scarcely reckon among her friends. He was but a mere acquaintance. She had met him casually now and then, and once or twice they had conversed about books and art and music,

and that was all. And yet, though he was only an acquaintance, and she did not know that she would ever see him again, his face often came up before her; he had captivated her fancy more than any other man on earth had done. He was poor, and likely to remain poor to the end of his days. He was unknown in the great world of Art and Literature and Law and Commerce. He was but a village pastor, a young man preaching in a small chapel for the barest pittance; a young man who loved books, who lived in a region of lofty thought—an ideal world of his own in some respects—who saw visions and dreamed dreams that were not given to every man.

And then, by the side of his pale, thoughtful face, with its delicate nostrils, and large expressive eyes, there came up the ruddy rubicund face of Sir George Hardwood, with his thick fleshy lips, his full animal eyes, his bald head and double chin, and she knew that if she ever gave her heart to anyone it would not be to a man of the type of the baronet. He might have riches, and social position, and an ancient name, but they were nothing in her eyes. To mate with a man whose thoughts were sordid, and who lived for gain and pleasure, who could talk about nothing but stocks and shares and horse flesh, who had not a soul above that which was of the earth earthy, would be worse than death to her. If she ever loved, the man would have to be of the other type. He might be poor and neglected, he might have to live in obscurity all the days of his life, but that would be compensated for by the joy of companionship, by the bliss of a true kinship.

She might never see Ernest Everett again, and

even if she did it might make no difference. Their positions were greatly changed since they used to meet occasionally in the quiet little village of Graystone. Her father had grown rich in the meanwhile, and they occupied a big house, and lived in considerable style ; nevertheless, the young Independent preacher remained, in her imagination, an ideal to which the man whom she could love would have to approximate to a greater or lesser degree.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRICE OF SIN.

Two days later, her father called her into his room.

"Sir George Hardwood tells me," he said, abruptly, "that he has asked you to be his wife, and that you have refused. Is that so?"

"It is so," she answered.

"And why did you refuse him?" he asked, almost angrily.

"Because I do not love him," she said, "and I am quite sure I never shall."

"Oh, that is all nonsense," he replied, testily, "he is one of the best catches in the country. He has been a great friend to me, and a great help too. I am very much disappointed with you, and I hope you will reconsider your decision."

"No, father; I shall never reconsider it," she answered.

"Don't be so emphatic," he said; "you are not the only person to be considered in this matter. Remember that I have a voice, and that I have authority also, and I expect when Sir George asks you again that you will give him a very different answer."

"I shall never give him any different answer," she said, defiantly.

"Then you will have me to reckon with," he

said, "and when I say a thing I mean it; and if you attempt to defy me it will be the worse for you;" and taking his hat he marched out of the room. Madge stared after him for a few seconds in astonishment, then returned to her chair and sat down. The trail of the golden serpent seemed to be over everything. Her father's so-called good fortune had been his curse, and was likely to become a greater bane still. Outwardly they were prosperous, but inwardly she felt they were growing poorer and poorer every day. She saw her father slowly changing before her eyes. There was a time when she admired him, when his thoughtful face was as a beautiful picture to her. Now her reverence was a steadily diminishing quantity; he was becoming hard and cruel, and selfish and cynical. While he grew rich in money he grew daily poorer in all that made life beautiful and worthy, and now to crown all he was ready to sacrifice her—to offer her up on the altar of worldly position. It was hateful and despicable, and tears of anger and regret welled up in her eyes.

Later in the day she went out for a walk alone. The weather was beautiful, the roads a treat. In the distance, coming down the hill, was a bicyclist—the only one, strangely enough, in all the long stretch of road. She raised her eyes once or twice as he came nearer and nearer, but she felt no interest in anything at the moment. Her heart was too sore, her spirits too depressed.

Suddenly the bicyclist slowed up just opposite her and dismounted. She raised her eyes, and the blood rushed in a torrent to her neck and face.

It was Ernest Everett, the young pastor of Bethel

Chapel, Graystone. Many people know what a pleasure it is to see a familiar face in a strange land, and London was still a strange land to Madge; she had not got used to it yet—she sometimes thought she never would. Graystone was still home to her, and often in her imagination she pictured its rows of quaint cottages, its quiet lanes, its long stretches of undulating pasture land, its simple, homely, slow-moving life; and again and again she found herself pining for the days that would never return.

Hence the sight of Ernest Everett's face was like a draught of water to a thirsty traveller. She had seen no one from Graystone for a year and half, and she was eager for news of all the people she knew. People who are only remotely acquainted become quite friendly when they meet in a strange city, and Ernest Everett seemed to her like a very old friend indeed.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, holding his bicycle with his left hand and reaching out to her his right. "I did not know you lived in this part of London."

"Oh, yes, we have been living here for some time," she answered.

"And do you like it?" he questioned.

"Yes, for London, I think it is very beautiful," she answered; "of course I have not got quite used to it yet. It isn't like Graystone, for instance."

"I should think not indeed," he said. "Graystone must seem tame after London."

"I don't know," she answered; "one can be as quiet here in the suburbs as fifty miles away in the country."

"Yes, but you are near the City," he answered; "its roar is almost in your ears, you can feel the beat of its mighty heart."

"I don't know that I want to feel the beat of its mighty heart," she said, with a smile; "I think I like the quiet of the country best."

"And your father, has he a school in this neighbourhood?" he asked.

She blushed and raised her eyes to his.

"Oh, no; father has never kept school since he left Graystone. Did you not know?"

"No," he answered, slowly, "you seemed to have quite passed out of sight. No one in Graystone appears to know what has become of you. I have often wondered where you were living."

"We have kept up no correspondence with any one," she said; "after the trouble that befell us it was father's wish that we should break with the old life entirely."

"Do you think that that was wise?" he answered; "none of you could help what was done by another."

"That is true, but we felt it all the same."

"No doubt, no doubt; we all felt sorry, and more than sorry—we were perplexed, and bewildered, and even yet people in Graystone feel as though there had been a mistake—a miscarriage of justice."

"I am glad to hear you say that," she replied, "for we have learned since that Harry is not our brother, though he will always be as a brother to me."

"He was a splendid fellow," Ernest said, with a far-away look in his eyes, "and his strange fall, if fall it was, will always be a puzzle to me."

For a while silence fell between them; then Madge said, "And how are all the people at Graystone?"

"I think they are about as usual," he answered; "there have been very few changes since you left. Of course, you have heard of the engagement between Miss Monica Stuart and Mr. Rupert Grant."

"No, I have not heard," she said.

"They are to be married when she is twenty-one, I understand."

"And is the Earl quite well?"

"Yes, he seems as well as ever."

"And you still continue to minister at Bethel?" she questioned, smiling.

"Oh, yes, that seems the only place for me at the present time, and I don't think I want a change. Do you know that my people have purchased your old house as a manse?"

"No, I did not know," she said, with a sudden accession of colour to her cheek.

"It came into the market soon after you left," he said, "and my deacons bought it and have furnished it for me. I told them it was something of a white elephant, as I had no wife and no prospect of getting one."

"But you have a sister, perhaps," Madge questioned, with a smile, "who will be glad to come and keep house for you?"

"Unfortunately, I have not," he said. "I have two sisters, it is true, but they have houses of their own to look after, and so I am driven to find a house-keeper somewhere. I am anxious to get hold of some elderly party who will play the mother to me."

"But it will be far nicer than living in the village," she said. "Have you taken up your residence there yet?"

"No, not yet; it has only just been completed. I have come up to town now for the purpose of getting a few things that I shall need in my new capacity as householder."

"I only hope you will be as happy there as we were," she answered, slowly, with a touch of regret in her tone. "Do you know I look back upon Graystone with infinite pleasure sometimes?"

"But I fancy you would soon tire of it if you had to live there again?" he answered.

"Perhaps I should," she answered, slowly; "it is natural to glorify the scenes of one's early life."

They had been walking side by side during most of this conversation, he pushing his bicycle with his left hand and she walking on his right. Every now and then she glanced up into his face with unconcealed admiration in her eyes. He did not look much like a minister, certainly. His grey tweed bicycling suit, his cloth cap, his low shoes, his scarlet necktie, took away from him every suggestion of clericalism. Madge thought he had greatly improved since she saw him last. His cheeks were fuller and browner, his voice had a heartier ring, he carried himself with a robust air.

They came at length to the parting of the ways. One road led up to the rim of the Heath, the other was the route to the City.

"Do we part here?" he said, seeing her pause.

"I presume so," she answered. "This is the nearest way for me."

"I hope I am not intruding," he said, "but I should like to go with you to the Spaniard's Road. I have not been there for years."

"It will be out of your way considerably, will it not?" she questioned.

"It may be a little, but I do not mind. I shall do nothing to-day, and I shall not return to Graystone till to-morrow or the day following."

So without any more words they began to climb the hill. For a while neither of them spoke. The road had been newly laid in places, and he had to pick a path for his machine.

At length a chair in the full eye of the spring sunshine tempted them to turn aside and rest. It was his proposal, and Madge did not raise the slightest objection. It was pleasant to have the old days brought back so vividly, pleasant to talk to one whose words rang true and sincere, and pleasantest of all to find that this accidental meeting brought with it no sense of disillusionment. Ernest Everett was handsomer and manlier than ever her memory had pictured him.

"I suppose you still keep up your music?" he questioned, after a few moments of very delightful silence.

"I am afraid I don't," she said, with a smile. "You see, I don't give lessons now."

"Indeed," he said, slowly, and he raised his eyes and looked at her questioningly.

She volunteered no further explanation, however. She was not in the mood to talk about herself.

"And do you live near here?"

"Yes, our house is not a great distance away. We

lived first at Stroud Green. Do you know Stroud Green ? ”

“ No, I can’t say that I do. You see I never lived in London.”

“ I don’t think you would like it. It is a terribly lonely place.”

“ I fancy I should disagree with you in that,” he said with a smile.

“ I suppose some people like it,” she answered after a pause. “ Men who go into the City every day, and mix in its crowds and take part in its ceaseless struggle, feel it, perhaps, more or less exhilarating ; but for the women who stay at home and practically do nothing but make calls, it is anything but inspiring.”

“ I think life is humdrum for most people,” he answered, “ whether in the city or in the country. The main thing is to have a definite end in view, and get recreation in striving for it.”

“ I am afraid that is where I suffer lack,” she answered, “ with a wistful look in her eyes ; “ I fear sometimes I am growing very lazy and terribly selfish.”

He glanced at her and wondered. She was well, even expensively, dressed. She did nothing, and her father no longer kept a school. Had he come into a fortune, he wondered, or had he found in this great City a more lucrative situation ? He was strongly tempted to ask her a point-blank question, but refrained. If Madge wanted him to know she would tell him.

After a while the conversation drifted round again to Graystone, and then it flowed more freely.

Her eyes sparkled with genuine interest when he spoke to her of his work, and of what he purposed doing if his life were spared.

Once or twice during their conversation he regretted his poverty. He had often thought of Madge since she went away from Graystone, though hardly in the light of matrimony. His salary was scarcely more than enough to keep one, and to ask any refined and educated girl to share his poverty would be the height of presumption. Yet, as he caught the light of sympathy in Madge's eyes to-day, he felt as though the fates had dealt hardly with him.

He was sure he could love Madge Morton if he allowed his heart way in any degree. He was not sure that he did not love her as it was. One thing he was quite certain of, that there was not another maiden in the world that he cared for a hundredth part as much.

Madge rose at length, and with a little sigh he followed her on to the Spaniard's Road.

"They will think I am lost at home," she said with a winsome smile; "I really must be going now; but I cannot tell you what a pleasure it has been to see some one from Graystone."

"And shall I lose sight of you again for another eighteen months?" he asked, regretfully.

"Ah! that is more than any one can tell. People meet in London in such accidental ways."

"In the City. But I think you said you did not often go into the City?"

"No, I don't very often. Mother and Dora go much more frequently."

"And you take your recreation in this neighbourhood?"

"Sometimes, but only when the weather is fine."

"I usually come up about once a month," he said after a pause.

"Indeed!"

"I am on a committee that meets on the second Wednesday in each month, and I like to attend, if it is at all possible."

"And do you always come on your bicycle?"

"Oh, no. Only during the summer months, when the weather is fine. It is a good four hours' run from Graystone here."

"So you start about one o'clock?"

"Yes, generally. Our committee meets at seven in the evening."

"It is possible we may meet again some time," she answered, and held out her hand to him.

He grasped it quickly and held it for a moment. "I shall always look out for you when I come this way," he said.

And for answer she gave him a smile, and waited till he mounted his machine and rode away.

Madge walked quickly home in a very meditative frame of mind. If she could only take her life in her own hands, and shape it to her own liking, how different it would be. But girls had to be silent and wait the turn of events, and often by the force of circumstances were driven into positions which they hated, and yet from which there seemed no escape.

As she walked up the drive to the house she saw her father and Sir George Hardwood walking up and down in very earnest conversation.

In a moment all the blood left her cheeks. She felt instinctively that there was trouble brewing for her. Nevertheless, she was resolved that nothing should coerce her into marrying the baronet. She hated the sight of him, and all the more so since seeing Ernest Everett. But she little guessed how powerful the forces were that were working against her.

Evil not only slays the wicked; it just as frequently slays those who are innocent. In fact, the innocent often suffer most and bear the heaviest share of the penalty. When Robert Morton began to weave the mesh of dishonesty and falsehood he did not realise how many others might become entangled. The danger to Harry he foresaw, but he looked no further than that.

Since he had been in London he had learned many things. Among the rest he had learned that there were rogues in the metropolis quite as clever as himself and, on the whole, rather more so. To play with edged tools required great skill and agility, and after all Robert Morton was only a novice at the business. His success had blinded his eyes to many of the perils that lurked in his path, and the rapidity of his social advancement had made him reckless. So far he prided himself that he had not made a miss. His most daring and reckless speculations had proved the most successful. With the general public Morton and Fletcher were names to conjure with. But there were a few people in what was termed "the know." How they got into "the know" would take too long to tell.

Sir George Hardwood was one of these. Robert

Morton had used him as his tool. Sir George had appeared quite content to be his tool. It was a pretty game of wits, and Robert lost.

The baronet, however, was generous and more than generous. He did not ask for gold or scrip.

Madge was the price of secrecy and safety, and Robert gave his word that the price should be paid, and felt immensely proud of the transaction.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LIBERTY AND BONDAGE.

MONICA never fully realised what she had done until she saw the announcement of her engagement in *The County Times*; then the full significance of her act almost overwhelmed her. Smarting under a sense of wrong and loss: angry, reckless and almost despairing, she had completely lost her sense of proportion and perspective, and for a while did not care what happened to her, and was utterly indifferent as to whether she lived or died.

It was in that mood that she had listened to Rupert Grant's proposal and had promised to be his wife. The announcement of the engagement did not appear in the paper until two or three weeks after, by which time she had begun to recover something of her normal tone, and when she saw her name in black and white standing out from the printed page, and coupled with that of Rupert Grant, a hot wave of shame and consternation swept over her.

"Oh, what have I done?" she wailed, wringing her hands and staring hard at the paper.

Until now everything had seemed unreal and shadowy and tentative; now the fact stood out in hideous baldness for all the world to see. Rupert like a wise man had left her pretty much to herself. He had argued rightly that she was in no mood for

love-making—that it was best to let her get used to the idea that she was his promised wife before he put himself very much in evidence. He did not even give her an engagement ring—first, because he was hard up, and secondly, because in her present mood she might fling it in his face.

He was not so madly in love that he pined constantly to be in her presence; as a matter of fact, he was happier at a distance. But he was anxious, nevertheless, that there should be no slip. His first impulse was to announce the engagement in the local press without an hour's delay, but he thought better of it. Too great precipitancy might spoil his game. He would allow a reasonable time to elapse, and then he would clinch the nail.

Monica, after she read the announcement, shut herself in her room and remained there most of the day. For the first time she faced the situation calmly and dispassionately. But the cold light of reason brought very little comfort to her heart or illumination to her path.

She hated herself for giving the promise. She hated Rupert for binding her to it under such conditions, and yet even now she was in no mood to unsay what she had said. If she were to do so what would happen? She would be accused of all sorts of mean things. She would make her guardian terribly angry, for he had evidently set his heart upon the alliance. She would place herself in an exceedingly false position, and make her life at Graystone a most unhappy one.

"I don't suppose I can mend it," she said to herself, with a mixture of despair and defiance in her

tone. "I suppose I must marry somebody, and Rupert is less objectionable than most men. He cares nothing for me and I care nothing for him, and as we quite understand each other we ought to get on very well."

When Rupert called next day she received him quite pleasantly, and even consented to take a drive with him on condition that she handled the reins and whip.

"It would look better if I drove," Rupert demurred.

"I am afraid I don't care anything about looks," she answered; "I'm not going to trust my life in your hands—at least not yet. You know nothing about horses, and Prince particularly needs humouring."

Rupert coloured and looked annoyed. It was the truth that stung him. But his ignorance of horses was his misfortune rather than his fault.

"As you will, Monica," he said at length, and walked to the window to hide his annoyance.

"Guardy ought to have given you some driving lessons," she went on, "but I suppose he would not think about it. He is so fond of handling the ribbons himself."

"And my father is too poor to keep horses," he answered, sullenly, without turning his head.

"Never mind, I'll give you a few lessons myself," she said, a little bit maliciously; "now that we are engaged I shall have a perfect right to do so, shan't I?"

He coloured again, and then his face brightened. Her admission of the engagement took quite a load

off his mind. He had been on the fidget all the time lest she should "back out," as he expressed it. But this sudden and candid recognition of the fact quite reassured him.

"You will have a perfect right to do lots of things now," he answered, brightly; "and I assure you I shall prove an apt pupil."

"Oh, don't boast, Rupert, for really in some things you are awfully dull; you'll excuse me for saying so, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll excuse you, Monica, but you need not repeat it. A man may call himself a fool, but—but——"

"He doesn't like other folks to call him one, eh?"

"Well, if a man called me dull the chances are he would feel dull himself before he had time to count ten."

"Unless he were bigger than you, Rupert."

"No, I should not stop to consider that question."

Monica gave a little laugh. Then her face suddenly grew grave. Her thoughts went back instinctively to that encounter she had witnessed between Rupert and Harry.

Poor Harry, he was never absent from her thoughts for very long together, and she constantly pictured him "doing" his weary two years in some horrible prison. In which of the prisons he was pining she did not know. No one had told her, and she never had the heart to ask. It did not matter. She had seen her last of him.

She wished he had died instead, then she could think of him as being at rest and free from the worry and pain of life. It was the fact that he was alive

and suffering that kept his memory so green and would not allow her to forget him.

Rupert cut short her reflections. "Here comes Sam with the dogcart," he said.

"Oh, wait a moment while I get my gloves," and she ran quickly out of the room and up the broad stairs.

"Just like a woman," he grunted to himself as he looked after her. "There's always something wanted at the last moment. I wonder if a woman was ever in time for anything yet; but, by Jove! Monica will take a lot of managing."

He discovered, much to his chagrin as the months rolled by, that she refused to be managed. In spite of anything he might say or suggest she persisted in going her own way.

"If you don't like me as I am, Rupert," she would say, with a smile, "you have only to say the word."

And he would protest humbly that his life was bound up in hers, and that her happiness was his.

In spite of these protestations, however, things were by no means as satisfactory as he would like them. He saw the possibility of complications. In most events there is generally much more than appears on the surface; it was sometimes the unexpected that happened, and he felt that he would never be absolutely certain of his ground until Monica was safely his wife. When once the knot was tied, and he had her purse at his back, he would be able to face all contingencies and snap his fingers at such fears as now possessed him.

When six months had gone by he suggested to Monica that they should get married without further

delay. "It seemed stupid," he said, "to waste the best portion of their lives in such a dull, stagnant place as Graystone."

She raised her eyebrows at him inquiringly.

"My idea is not to settle anywhere for a while," he went on. "Why not spend a year or two in travel? Think what a splendid time we might have in visiting the capitals of Europe."

"Do you think you would like it?"

"Like it? I tell you it would be just lovely. We are simply stagnating here. Besides, people never enjoy travel so much as when they are young, and we shall never be younger, Monica."

"What an original remark!"

"But you can't say it isn't true," he said, with a good-humoured laugh.

"No, that seems fairly obvious," she said, demurely.

"Then why not fall in with my suggestion, and let us get married straight away?"

She looked at him gravely for a second or two; then her face brightened with a smile.

"I am afraid my reason will not commend itself to you, Rupert," she said; "but the truth is, I want to enjoy my freedom as long as I possibly can."

"But surely you do not call stagnating here enjoyment?" he questioned, eagerly.

"It may not seem much to boast of," she said, slowly, "but I fancy a poor freedom is better than a sumptuous bondage."

"You ought not to speak of the marriage state as bondage," he said, reproachfully.

"In our case I'm afraid it must be," she answered.

"We are not pretending to marry each other for love. As I said at the first, it is purely a family arrangement, and when two people are tied together for life who don't care much more than the proverbial two straws for each other it is bound to be a condition of bondage."

"Pardon me, Monica," he said, humbly, "but you are surely assuming a great deal that is not true."

"Not true?" she questioned, raising her eyebrows.

"Yes, Monica. It is not true to say that I don't care two straws for you; I am sorry and pained if, after all these months, you have no love for me. But you ought to know that I love you devotedly—passionately."

"Oh, nonsense, Rupert. I am sure we quite understand each other, and no amount of protesting will make any difference."

"Perhaps you will believe me some day," he said, in hurt tones. "Evidently, at present, you do not understand me."

"Oh, yes, I do," she said, with a smile.

"You think so, but your words prove that you don't," he answered, dismally.

"Oh, very well then, we will not debate the question any further."

"And won't you let the marriage take place soon, Monica?"

"No, Rupert, I'll be free till I'm twenty-one, at any rate; that's final."

"No, don't say it's final," he pleaded, "think again. As my wife you will be as free as you are now, and, as a matter of fact, a good deal freer. We

shall be able to travel abroad and enjoy ourselves, and when we are tired of that we can take a house in Kensington or Bayswater and get into the swim of London society, and then be as happy as it's possible for two mortals to be."

She smiled at him wistfully and shook her head, and then the matter dropped for the time; but Rupert was tenacious and returned to the subject again and again.

"She will yield to my wishes yet," he would say to himself, with a smile, "and, by Jove! if I don't get the wedding over during the next year there'll be complications."

Meanwhile, Harry was wearing his heart out within four stone walls. He tried his best to reconcile himself to his fate, and put from him as far as he could all memories of the past and all anticipations of the future. But the mind is less amenable to coercion than the body. He had considerable strength of will, but memory defied him, and his thoughts refused to be chained.

Moreover, he was not always certain that he had done the right thing. To pay the price of another's sin might under certain circumstances be a very noble and praiseworthy act; but whether or no such circumstances obtained in his case he was by no means sure. Robert Morton might be encouraged to do yet further wrong, while Madge, Dora, and Bob, whom he had been most anxious to serve, might gain nothing in the end; in fact they might suffer a greater loss. So his mind was in a constant conflict of doubt.

"If I were only sure that I was doing good by the

sacrifice of myself," he would say to himself, "I think I could bear it better, but heaven knows I may be doing more harm than good."

At other times he would look at the matter in quite a different light.

"I am here," he would say to himself, "just because I could not help it. There's nothing vicarious about it. If I had told all I knew I should be no better off. Nobody would believe me. It was a case of Hobson's choice."

His only comforting thought was the fact of his innocence. But even that brought him but a small measure of compensation. Innocence in itself seemed a very little thing when the world thought him guilty. The bitter irony of it all almost drove him mad.

But the worst of all was he had lost Monica. There was no denying the fact that, notwithstanding all that he had said to himself to the contrary, he had cherished the hope that some day he would win her for his wife.

He knew she liked him, that in her bright girlish way she was exceedingly fond of him. He knew also that she was never influenced by pride of blood or name, that in her eyes he was as good as any one else; and in addition to that he had his dreams of success. He had pictured himself being called to the Bar; he had dreamed of pleading in some great case that should bring his name prominently to the front; he had seen himself raised to the rank of Queen's Counsel. He had even fancied himself taking his seat in Parliament, and then what would there be to hinder him from claiming Monica as his bride?

Alas! it was all over now, and the thought was as the bitterness of death to him. He made no attempt and expressed no desire to communicate with any one during his imprisonment. Why should he? To forget and be forgotten summed up all his desire. If he could die before the day came for his release he would be devoutly thankful.

Hence, though he put as brave a face on the situation as was possible, he pined and drooped like a forest bird shut up in a cage. It was not the prison discipline—though that was bad enough and brutalising enough in all conscience. It was the sense of loss, the utter darkness and hopelessness of the future. Everything that was worth living for had been taken from him. He almost dreaded the time when he should be again free.

Free! What bitter mockery that word may express. There is no more freedom for the man who has once served in one of Her Majesty's gaols—the Christian public of England will make very well sure of that. If he is not so completely brutalised by the treatment he has received that he has no moral sense left, and no desire but to wreak his vengeance upon society generally, that same society will see to it that he has given to him no chance to rise, no opportunity to redeem the past.

Harry looked forward to his release with painful apprehension. He was too young and healthy for the prison treatment to kill him outright. It might crush his spirit and break his heart, it might sap his morals and develop every evil instinct of his nature, but that he would die was too good to hope for. Hence, as the months travelled slowly away, the

question that troubled him was, What should he do with himself when he was once more sent adrift upon the world? Where should he go? How should he earn a living? To whom should he apply?

These were questions that pressed themselves upon him with painful urgency. Should he go back to Graystone, and call upon the man he had regarded as his father, and seek his protection and help, or should he make for the great city and lose himself in the crowd?

But somehow he could never give a definite answer to the question. Perhaps the wisest thing would be to go straight away to London directly his prison doors were thrown open, change his name, and try to make a fresh start. Yes, that would be no doubt the wisest course.

"But I would like to see Madge again," he would reflect. "Dear, faithful Madge, I am sure she has fretted a good deal. I wonder if any one else has come along to comfort her? Dora used to declare that that young Independent parson was in love with her, but I expect that it was mere fancy on her part; though Dora had sharp eyes for her years. Dear me, by this time Dora will have quite grown up—and Bob and mother—I should like to look at them all once more—I should—I should—and Monica, ah, if I could only look at her without being seen, I wonder if it would ease my heartache or make it ache all the more."

So he debated the question, and the slow, weary days and nights grew into weeks and months till there came an evening when his warder told him that on the following morning he would be free.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BREATH OF FREEDOM.

HARRY had lost none of his good-conduct marks, hence his release came somewhat sooner than he expected. He heard the announcement in silence; he hardly knew whether to be sorry or glad. For a moment a thrill of joy ran through his heart—to be free again opened up vistas of pleasure that had been denied him for many long and weary months—but the joy was only for a moment. The old feeling of despair swept over him again. What should he do with his freedom? Where should he go in his disgrace? How face the people whom he knew and who knew him? Or how, under a strange name and in a strange place, should he begin again?

He scarcely slept a wink that night. Though he had received the announcement of his freedom with no enthusiasm, still he was strangely excited. For months the old happy past had been gradually receding from his mind; the memory of it was becoming more and more dim. Prison life was imperceptibly dulling his faculties; the power to think was very much less than when he entered the prison. The entire system of gaol discipline tended to obscure the mental vision, to dull the perceptions, to cloud the imagination, to render the mind slow of movement and slow of comprehension,

But the announcement of the gaoler that he was to be free on the morrow was like an electric shock; it quickened every sense, it brought every faculty of his mind into play. The dull, stolid feeling rolled away from his heart as if by magic. He felt himself once more alive; memory unlocked all her doors and threw open all the windows. He felt another man.

But with this quickened sensibility came an acuter pain, a more bitter despair. To the man of good abilities, of good reputation, and who has also a good start, the world is a hard enough place. But for the man who has no start and no reputation—the man who may be discovered at any moment as a gaol-bird, a man who has to begin at the bottom without means and without friends—then the world is a cruel place, and life is but a hopeless struggle for existence.

It was from this that Harry shrank. He saw all too vividly what lay before him, and his courage failed him in face of such an encounter. So he lay on his hard bed, staring into the darkness, sometimes thrilling with an unexpected joy, and at other times overcome and overwhelmed by the dark waves of despair.

“To-morrow I shall be free,” he kept saying to himself, “and yet what shall I do with my freedom? How shall I face the world again? How look into the eyes of those who knew me and who believe that I am guilty?”

Just as the daylight began to creep into his cell he fell into a heavy sleep, and when at length the prison bell sounded, it disturbed a very beautiful

dream, in which he was wandering across the fields between Graystone and Minver with Monica by his side. The sun was shining brilliantly overhead, the birds were singing joyfully in the trees, a happy smile was on Monica's lips, a beautiful light was shining in her eyes. He had been speaking to her words of love, and she had responded with undisguised affection, and there was no thought of trouble in his heart, no memory of pain or disaster; the thread of his dream left out the bitter experience of the last two years, and wove pictures for him of unmarred delight and beauty.

With something like a groan he opened his eyes; the next moment his door was thrown open, and the warder entered, bringing the suit of clothes that he had worn during his trial. It was very much crumpled, and looked as if it had lain in a rag-heap for the last two years. Nevertheless, it was a relief once more to get out of his prison attire and into civilised raiment.

What surprised him, however, was that the garments seemed to have stretched during the past two years. He did not realise how shrunken he was, how thin almost to emaciation he had become. Some of the prisoners grew stout on prison diet, and not only developed muscle, but put on flesh.

It was not so, however, with him; his brain had been too active, his heart was too troubled during the long months of his confinement. He had pined and fretted to such an extent that he had worn nearly all the flesh off his bones. Had there been a looking-glass in the cell he would have started back aghast at the sight. His clean-shaven face, thin and haggard,

his closely-cropped hair, his deep, hollow eyes, his almost bloodless lips, would have been a revelation to him.

It was fortunate he could not see himself just then, but the dressing process convinced him that a great change had been wrought in him physically, as well as mentally. His clothes literally hung upon him, and he declared to the warder that the wrong suit had been brought to him, that these were the clothes of a much bigger man.

"They are your own clothes," the warder remarked, stiffly, "but you have lost flesh, for some reason, since you came in."

"Lost flesh," Harry said, stripping up his sleeves, and looking at his thin arms; "well, I believe I have lost flesh, but it has been so gradual that I have not noticed it until now."

"You see, you had never been used to hard work before you came here," the warder said; "we always know by people's hands whether they have worked hard or not."

"I've worked hard enough since I came in, at any rate," said Harry, with a poor attempt at a laugh. A few minutes later, his breakfast was brought in, but he had little appetite for it. He was still painfully excited; he was starting life afresh, and under entirely new conditions, and he was almost appalled at the prospect.

By-and-by the warder came into his cell again, and after certain preliminaries he found himself with several others in the big courtyard. After a few minutes the heavy prison gates were slowly opened, and, with the other prisoners who that morning

received their release, he went out into the September sunshine.

Here he was met by a missionary belonging to the Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, who offered to give him help if he needed any, or to provide him with a breakfast, if the prison fare had not satisfied him that morning.

Harry thanked the good man for his kindness, and said that he would receive any pecuniary help that might be offered him with gratitude, as he was quite destitute of funds, and a few minutes later he started on his tramp with a shilling in his pocket.

For a while he walked with a certain aimlessness of manner, for he had not yet decided what to do. The missionary had given him directions as to the different routes, and whither they tended, but he had resolved that he would be guided by circumstances, or by the impulses of his own heart.

By-and-by he reached four cross-roads, with a finger-post standing in the centre; one road led to London, another was the highway to York, the third road led to Cambridge, and the fourth to Rugby. For a few minutes he hesitated, then looking at one of the finger-posts he said to himself, "This road will lead through Graystone. Shall I, or shall I not?"

The question lay between Graystone and London, and in the end Graystone won. The mist came up in his eyes as he thought of the old days and of those whom he loved. "I should like to look upon the old faces once more," he said to himself, "even if I do not make myself known. Madge, at any rate, will be glad to see me; and Bob, little Bob, it will do his heart good, I believe, to look into my eyes again."

Then his thoughts ran away to Monica, he would like to see her also. So he turned his face toward Graystone, and tramped on mile after mile, dreaming of the past. It was beautiful weather, the time of late harvest. In the fields the wains were being loaded with yellow sheaves to be carted away to the stackyard. A soft, warm, luminous haze lay across all the land; here and there the leaves of the trees were just being touched with autumn tints, but in the main all the plantations and woods were in full leaf. By the roadside the autumn flowers were still in bloom, and as he passed by farmsteads and orchards the smell of apples was strong in the air.

Now and then he forgot the fact that he was a discharged prisoner. The joy of freedom was in his heart once more, the smell of the open country in his nostrils, the warmth and glory of the sunshine was all about him. But these moments of forgetfulness were always succeeded by a strong revulsion of feeling. He was a free man once more it was true, and all the wide-stretching country was his to enjoy. His ears were open to the song of the birds and his eyes to all the beauties of nature, and yet—and yet—what a difference between the present and the past!

He thought of the last long tramp he had with Madge; how they had wandered for miles across the open country, how they had returned together in the late afternoon, Madge leaning upon his arm and tramping bravely by his side. It seemed almost ages ago; it was his last excursion into the country. Now he was journeying to Graystone again, but in what a different mood. Now he walked alone and

wondered what the end of his journey would bring. No picture of a happy welcome came to cheer him ; but a dread lest those whom he loved should look upon him coldly, and perhaps close the door in his face, lay like a weight on his heart.

After several hours' tramp he turned in at a way-side public-house, and spent half his fortune in something to eat and drink, a junk of bread with a bit of cheese, and a mugful of cold water. Over the mantelpiece of the small parlour was a fly-blown mirror, surrounded by scalloped pink and yellow tissue-paper. He could scarcely repress an exclamation of surprise when he first caught sight of his own reflection. Instinctively he turned, fancying someone else was in the room, and that the face was that of a stranger. He was quite alone, however, and was soon convinced that the reflection he was looking at was that of himself.

"I may venture to Graystone with impunity," he said to himself a little bitterly, "for no one will recognise me." A hot blush swept over his face as he ran his hand over the stubble of his hair, and he muttered something like a curse.*

"They need not have branded me in this way," he said, bitterly, "they might have allowed me to go forth unrecognised ; as it is, everyone will know by my appearance that I have just come out of gaol. Well, I suppose it doesn't matter, a man who has been in prison should have no pride left."

Then he turned to his bread and cheese and

* It is only recently that a regulation has been passed providing that the hair of prisoners shall be allowed to grow to its normal length before release.

devoured it ravenously. He spent another penny in a pipe of tobacco, which he smoked with infinite relish. It was the first taste of tobacco he had had for two whole years; and while he blew the wreaths of smoke from his mouth and watched them curling upward toward the ceiling he forgot for a moment who he was and where he was. Lying back in the chair dreamily puffing at his pipe—a long churchwarden which the landlord lent him—he gave himself up to complete forgetfulness, and tried with some measure of success to banish all memories of the past and all anticipations of the future.

The sun was dipping westward when at length the surrounding country began to wear a familiar face. At length he had got into the region that he knew, and over which he had tramped. He recognised the outline of the hills; the churches and spires began to wear a familiar aspect. He was able at length to give a name to the farmsteads; steadily he was nearing Graystone.

At length people began to pass him whom he slightly recognised. They looked at him curiously and passed on.

“I know them,” he muttered to himself, “but evidently they do not know me.” Nearer and nearer he drew to the place where he had spent so many years of his life. It seemed a long time ago since he went away, and yet nothing had changed; the same cattle and sheep appeared to be in the fields, the same carts rumbled along the high road, the same farmers came slouching by, dressed in the same old clothes, and he could swear almost wearing the same shoes. Everything was familiar and un-

changed, he alone was different, nothing else had altered in the smallest degree.

By-and-by he reached the brow of a hill which commanded a full view of Graystone valley. He could just see, peeping among the trees, the gable end of his father's house; the large garden also, that stretched round at the back, and at one side was plainly visible in parts. He looked long and eagerly, wondering if he should see any figure moving among the flower beds and fruit trees; but the place seemed quite deserted. On the other side of the road beyond was the fringe of trees that bounded Graystone Park. How often he had looked away between those trees, for the flutter of a dress that should tell of Monica's presence.

Farther down the valley was the tower of the parish church, with a jumble of red-tiled roofs that marked the locality of the village. How often he and Madge had stood leaning upon that very gate, looking over the valley, pointing out to each other the various familiar features. Now he was alone, and for a moment a mist came up before his eyes and blotted out the landscape.

Then the sound of horses' hoofs along the high road he had come attracted his attention. Brushing his hand quickly across his eyes, he turned round to see who might be driving that way. One glance was sufficient; he would have known them had they been a mile distant; as it was, they were close upon him, their faces clear and distinct in the bright sunshine. His own face clouded as he looked at them, and his lip trembled.

Monica had been giving her lover a lesson in

driving. He sat on the box seat, with the reins in his left hand, and holding the whip in his right. Rupert Grant looked happy and triumphant, a well-dressed, well-developed figure, that would attract a moment's attention anywhere.

By his side sat Monica, lovelier than in the old days. Her face was grave, and there was a wistful, pathetic look in her eyes.

Harry leaned heavily against the gate, for his emotion almost overcame him. The sight of Monica was so unexpected, that it threatened to unman him. She seemed different in some respects, though he was unable to make out just then in what the difference lay. She was less girlish in her appearance; her figure was more rounded, her face had more character in it; there seemed a greater reserve of strength about her mouth, her eyes wore a more serious expression, her cheeks seemed thinner than when he saw her last, and yet the change was for the better. She had developed into a beautiful woman, with character written upon every line of her face; and his heart went out to her in a great longing, and his loss seemed more terrible than ever. The glimpse of her face awoke all his old passion and desire, while the sight of Rupert Grant by her side, looking so happy and triumphant, filled him with a mad passion of jealousy, and made him angrier than he had been since the day when he saw him in the police-court. Rupert was on the other side of the trap and did not see the badly-dressed, emaciated figure, with a cloth cap pulled low over his forehead, standing with his back against the gate. Even if he

had seen him the chances are he would not have looked at him a second time.

But there was something in Harry's poise, something in the contour of his face, that caught Monica's attention in a moment ; and with a little start she bent her head forward and looked at him keenly. Harry met her eyes without flinching. It was clear she did not recognise him, and yet there was something about him that struck her as being familiar. Once or twice she took her eyes from him, but only to look again, and after the trap had passed he saw her turn in her seat and look back with a swift, searching glance. He did not move a muscle of his face, however ; he stood and stared as though he were an utter stranger.

Then darkness fell upon him, and with a groan he climbed over the gate and lay down upon the grass inside, and shut his eyes. Never had life seemed so dreary before, never had his heart ached with so much pain, never had he felt so acutely how much he had lost.

After a while he struggled to his feet again and made his way along the road in the direction of Graystone. Nearer and nearer came the house that would always seem like home to him, and he began to watch eagerly for some sign of Madge, or Dora, or Bob, or his mother.

At length he could see the door, which was standing open, but no one passed in or out. It was about the time of day when they were in the habit of going into the garden, and he wondered that none of them were visible. Still, on and on he tramped, getting nearer and nearer. Then he paused again, and



" . . . HE SAW HER TURN IN HER SEAT AND LOOK BACK WITH
A SWIFT SEARCHING GLANCE."

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leaned his back against a telegraph-post. For several minutes he looked at the house, but no one passed either in or out.

With beating heart he walked straight past it and looked in at the open door, and stared at all the windows, but there was no familiar face.

Beyond the house was the garden, and he stood and looked over the hedge, but no one was there. What could it mean? Should he go and make himself known? No, he had not courage to do that. So he walked on a little distance toward the village, then paused again. It was his hope that he might see Madge, that she might recognise him, that from her lips he might get some advice as to what he should do in the future.

For the space of a quarter of an hour he walked up and down, looking eagerly for the face of some member of the family. Then, with a strange fear gnawing at his heart, he walked straight up to the door and knocked. After two or three seconds he heard the sound of a footstep inside, and his heart gave a great bound. The next moment a strange face appeared in the passage, and an old woman came towards him. Then he knew that something had happened.

"Does not Robert Morton live here?" he questioned.

"Oh, no," was the reply, "he went away from here nearly two years ago."

"Indeed ; I thought he was still living here."

"No. It was this way," said the old woman. "He had a son who got into disgrace, and somehow he never could face the Graystone people any more, and so he went away."

"And do you know where he has gone to?" he asked.

"He has gone to London, I believe; but I don't think anybody knows exactly his whereabouts."

Harry leaned his shoulder against the wall for support. He felt suddenly weak and faint; but he quickly recovered himself.

"I knew Graystone very well at one time," he said, as if in reply to the old woman's inquiring glance; "but that was a good while ago. By the bye, I suppose Lord Menheniot is still living?"

"Aye, and in better health, they say, than he's been for years."

"And the vicar, is he still here?"

"Aye, Mr. Grant ain't likely to go, I reckon, until he's carried out."

"And is Mr. Everett still minister at Bethel?"

"Indeed, and I should think he is," was the energetic reply. "Why, this is the manse now, and I am his housekeeper."

"Oh, indeed, I did not know. I see time brings changes."

"That it does, and it'll bring more," the old woman said, becoming suddenly communicative. "You know'd Mary Jones, very likely; well, she's dead, and John Tabb married her sister, and his sister Liza is to be married next month to Joe Beer—you don't know him, likely. Then Peggy Martin, she's gone to London, and they do say she's got engaged since she went. Then there's to be big doings at the Hall when Miss Monica's twenty-one."

"Indeed!"

“Yes; she’s to marry Mr. Rupert Grant, and a grand affair it is to be.”

“She’s going to be married, is she?”

“Aye, it’s been all settled a goodish time now.”

“Ah, well, young folks will get married,” he said, with a wintry smile, and then, with a pleasant “Good afternoon,” he turned and walked out into the dusty road, and, after a moment’s hesitation, set his face towards London.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FATES ARE STRONG.

GENERALLY speaking a man has not much choice in the course he adopts. In the main, circumstances decide for him. Harry felt that he had no choice at all. In the morning he stood for a moment at the parting of the ways, now there was one way only.

"It's a longish tramp to London," he reflected, "but at any rate I can take my time over it, and possibly I may be able to pick up a few coppers on the way."

By taking the field path to Minver he would save half a mile of the journey; but that was not the only reason that actuated him. It might give him more pain than pleasure to walk the familiar way, but he could not resist the impulse. He might never come to Graystone again. In all probability he never would; this was his last farewell. So he would look his fill, dream over his earlier dreams once more, and then go away and try to forget.

The sun had disappeared behind the western hills when he climbed slowly and wearily over the stile, and took the path that led across a corner of Graystone Park. How familiar everything looked. It seemed but yesterday that he took the same path and came upon Monica seated on the stile. For a few moments memory ignored the

gulf that lay between. The past two years faded into oblivion. He was but a youth again, dreaming dreams more beautiful than anything pictured in the Arabian Nights. He expected to see Monica come bounding across the park to greet him; he raised his head suddenly as though he caught the sound of footsteps.

Then the illusion vanished, and the bitter reality swept like a cold wave over his heart, numbing every faculty.

The grey turreted house came into sight at length, and he paused for a few moments to look at it. It was but a modest mansion in its way—squarely built and without architectural distinction; but it had a comfortable look, while for situation it was all that could be desired.

“Lucky dog, Rupert,” he said to himself, with a curl of his strong upper lip. “I am glad I thrashed him when I had the opportunity; that is my one consoling morsel. I expect he is having dinner with her now after their drive. How he would chuckle if he knew I was limping along here hungry and homeless,” and he clenched his hands with savage energy.

“So he is to marry her, eh? Well, I have always foreseen that. Socially I suppose it is a very good arrangement; but she will break his heart, if he has any heart to break, and he will break hers. By heaven, it ought not to be allowed. God meant her for me, but—but the devil has spoilt His plans.”

At the boundary of the park was another stile, on which he sat and leaned his chin upon his hand. The twilight was creeping on apace. The birds had already ceased to sing. The quiet was absolutely

unbroken. There was not even the distant bark of a watch dog to accentuate the stillness.

The coming darkness did not trouble him. He could tramp just as well during the night as during the day. Indeed, he preferred the darkness on the whole; it offered him a kind of protection, it saved him from the peering eyes of passers-by.

Suddenly, a quick footstep sounded behind him; he started and turned his head, and found himself face to face with Monica. He saw in a moment that she recognised him. Her eyes were very bright, her lips were parted, her breath came and went in short gasps.

"You thought I did not recognise you this afternoon," she said, hurriedly, but with a forced calmness, "and I did not at first; you have greatly altered, but it came to me a minute later; and I have been looking out ever since for you."

"You should not be seen speaking to me," he said, quietly; "let me go my way and you go yours."

"Then you had no desire to see me when you came to Graystone?" she questioned.

"I came to see my sister Madge," he stammered, "and—and Dora and Bob."

"And you find they are flown."

"Time brings many changes," he said after a pause, and with downcast eyes.

"And have you changed?" she asked, with a certain hardness in her tone that he had never noticed before.

"Me? God help me! I hardly recognise myself. I feel like a whipped hound. I have no strength or energy left. If they had kept me another two years

I should have started robbing houses when I came out or picking pockets."

"Now you are talking at random," she said, reproachfully.

"At random!" and a strange light came into his eyes, like that which comes into the eyes of a beast at bay. "Ah, you do not know. You have never been in prison. I tell you they are murder houses; the bodies of men are kept alive, but their souls are murdered inch by inch."

She looked at him questioningly.

"Yes, I have changed," he answered, looking at her steadily, "and the truth has been growing clearer to me all the day. I have lost caste, if you can understand. I feel like a serf or a beggar. I have scarcely courage to look any one straight in the face. I want to slink away through by-lanes and hide in dimly-lighted places."

"That is foolish of you," she said, speaking low and with an effort.

"It may be. Perhaps I shall grow out of it in time. I don't know. It's hard for a man to rise and recover tone when no one believes in him."

"Don't say that. I believe in you, and I am quite sure many other people do."

For a moment his eyes grew moist.

"You are quite sure your confidence has not been shaken?" he asked, pathetically.

"Absolutely sure, Harry. I have never doubted you for a moment."

"God bless you," he said; "but for your sympathy, and the hope that you still believed in me, I should have died."

"I shall never cease to believe in you," she answered; "the only thing I doubt ——"

"Then you do doubt?" he questioned, eagerly.

"Yes, I doubt if justice will ever be done. I used to have a belief that, in the long run, everything would come out right, that God would outwit the evil man, and see that right was done."

"And now?" he said, with the shadow of a smile upon his lips.

"Oh, well, now I'm beginning to think that God lets things work themselves out just as they like. I reckon He keeps a general oversight, but He has too much to do, I fancy, to interfere in every little pettifogging affair that crops up."

"Then you don't believe that I shall ever win back my own?"

"I'm afraid I don't, Harry. I'm convinced that thousands of people suffer innocently, and never get justice done to them to the end of the chapter."

"I'm very much of your way of thinking," he answered. "I'm going to tramp to London, but I confess I have no hope."

"Then why go to London?"

"Where else can I go? It is the valley of Hinnom, to which all the social wreckage of the land drifts, or into which it is swept, the place where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched."

"But need you walk into it deliberately, walk into it with your eyes open?"

"Where else can I walk? It is the only door open to me. It is the bottomless pit, I know; but every other door is closed."

"No, not every other door, Harry," she said, at

length, speaking slowly, and almost through her shut teeth.

"Then what other door is open?"

"Do you not see that it is possible that I might help you?"

"You? No, it is impossible. I know you would like to help me, but—but charity. No, I would rather die."

She grew very pale and her lips twitched painfully. "There was a time," she said, speaking slowly and distinctly, "when I thought that—that you cared for me."

"Cared for you," he said, with a gasp, and his eyes flashed fire in a moment. "Cared for you? Oh, Heaven! I shall die loving you with every fibre of my being."

"And yet you will not let me help you."

"I cannot; I cannot. Oh, please do not torture me. Your good name would suffer, and I—I should curse myself into perdition."

For a while she was silent, and her breath came and went in quick, short gasps. She felt that she was playing a desperate part, a part that perhaps no girl ought to play. But the sight of Harry suffering and in need awoke her old love for him, and intensified it a hundredfold. She felt, too, as if Harry were the only one who could save her from the shame of marrying Rupert Grant. She was in a terrible strait. To let Harry go from her and sink down into despair and want and shame, while she had abundance, and in a few months would be her own mistress, would seem a wicked thing in the sight of Heaven, a cruel and heartless thing that

would remain a pillow of thorns for her to the day of her death. And yet, could she tell him that she was prepared to take him as he was, in poverty and disgrace, that she loved him and would give her life into his keeping, that she would go to the ends of the earth with him and live where no one knew them, and make new friends and build up a new home. Oh, if she could make him understand without putting it into so many words! If she were a man she could speak out and tell all the truth, but because she was a woman she must be dumb though her heart broke. She must love and be silent. Oh, it was cruel and wicked, and the tears welled up in her eyes and fell upon her cheeks.

He saw the tear-drops and almost choked.

"Don't pity me, Monica," he said, using her name for the first time, "I don't want pity, it unmans a man."

"It seems to me you don't want anything," she said, desperately, "you will neither receive help nor give it."

"Now you mock me. How can I give when I possess nothing?"

"Oh, why will you think that money meets the sum-total of the world's need? I have money in abundance, and yet I am sure no girl in England is as unhappy as I am."

"And could I make you less unhappy?" he asked, scarcely knowing what he said, or what reply to make.

"Oh! no, I suppose not," she said, with a note of bitterness in her voice that was new to it. "There

seems to be only one door open to me, as you say there is only one door open to you. So I must also drift into the valley of Hinnom, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

"But why? Surely ——"

"Because there is no hand stretched out to save me," she interrupted; "I suppose you know I have promised to marry Rupert Grant?"

"Yes. I have heard," he answered, compressing his teeth tightly.

"And you are quite willing that I should?"

"If you elect to marry Rupert Grant, or any one else, I cannot interfere."

"If I *elect* to marry Rupert Grant?" she said, bitterly, "do you think I should do so from choice?"

"You are surely your own mistress," he answered.

"Are you your own master? Can you do what you would? Have you never found circumstances too strong for you? Did you not say just now that there was only one course open to you?" She stood before him with burning cheeks, and a pleading light in her eyes.

"I stand rebuked," he said, and his eyes fell. "You have been forced into this."

"I have neither father nor mother, sister nor brother," she replied, with a little catch in her voice. "I have no one to take my part, or save me from myself. I must just go down with the flood, and you stand on the brink, and see me drift."

"Would to God that I could save you, Monica," he said, "but I am more helpless than you."

“Oh! in olden times,” she said, clasping her hands and bending her head, “men dreamed of other lands where life could be begun afresh and new homes built up and established.”

He started and turned very pale. Could she mean all that her words implied? he wondered; and for a moment a great storm of passion and emotion shook him. What a dream of delight her words opened up to him! Monica would be his wife. Monica, the woman of all women, the fairest and noblest of all the daughters of Eve—at least, so she seemed to him. And they would go away to some sunny land washed by southern seas; and they would dwell there and make new friends and rear a lovely home, and the old life of pain and struggle and disgrace would fade from their memories like an unpleasant dream, till it should lie no longer upon their lives, and they would do good, spending their days in the service of their fellows, and children, perhaps, would grow up around them, and an honoured old age would follow a well-spent life.

Oh! it was a beautiful picture, and for a moment it thrilled him to the finger-tips. And why should it not become a reality? He had done nothing that should render him unworthy of so much bliss. Nay, he deserved compensation for all the wrong he had suffered, and, if there was such a thing as justice in the world, he ought to have it. If Monica loved him and he loved her, ought they not to join hands for life, and dare the scorn of society, and dare every other thing? If God meant them for each other, should they allow the cackle of society dames, the abuse of interested parties, the mere sentiment of

family considerations to stand in their way? Though she was rich and he was poor, he was not altogether unworthy of her, and if he flung this chance away, what then? Monica would be forced into a hateful marriage with Rupert Grant, a man who did not understand her, who was unworthy of her, and who would break her heart in a few years. As for himself, he would drift a derelict upon the stormy and treacherous sea of time; forsaken of man, if not of God.

On all grounds of self-interest and expediency, and even of right, it seemed the proper thing to grasp this chance, and in saving himself save Monica also. On the one hand everything would be gained, and on the other everything lost.

Monica stood before him, white and trembling, waiting for him to speak. She had dared a great deal. She was amazed at herself that she could have spoken so plainly, and yet it seemed to her that life, and even eternity, were at stake.

He had not the courage to meet her eyes. Of all the battles of his life, this was the hardest. He longed with almost irresistible passion to take her in his arms, and press his lips to hers, and tell her that nothing on earth should separate them any more. Never had she been so brave, so beautiful, so womanly in his eyes as now.

And yet—and yet, in spite of logic and self-interest and policy, and every other consideration, he felt that he must resist. If he yielded he knew he would call himself a coward to the end of his days. While this stain remained upon his name, while the world believed him to be a forger, it would not be right to

take this innocent and confiding girl to share his shame. Not even to save her from marrying a man she despised, and to save himself from being an out-cast, could he consent. It might be the merest sentiment, he did not know. He only felt that it would be even more degrading to his manhood and self-respect than residence in gaol.

He pretended to misunderstand her when at length he spoke. "In the old days," he said, "men carried off women by force, and knights went to their rescue; but the force used to-day is not physical, and lance and sword are of no use to you. But you may be happy yet."

She dropped her eyes. It was not the answer she hoped for, or expected.

He looked up at her, and waited for her to speak, but she made no reply.

A long silence fell, then he held out his hand, and said, "Good-bye, Monica; if I were only strong myself I would say to you, Be strong. Be true to yourself against the world, and follow your own heart at all hazards. But I have no right to give advice to any one."

Her eyes were brimming over when she raised them to his. "It is of no use struggling," she said, brokenly, "the fates are too strong. I wish I could die."

"I think I could struggle if I were in your place," he said.

"And if I were a man nothing should daunt me," she answered. "Oh, I would conquer the world."

"I will try my best," he said, "and if you hear of my utter failure think kindly of me."

“No ; you will succeed. I have always believed in you.”

“And you, I have not only believed in, but loved, and always shall love—always—for ever——”

And without another word he turned and walked away and left her standing.

CHAPTER XXI.

RUPERT GETS IMPATIENT.

DURING the next twelve months, to all outward appearances, nothing of importance happened. Monica often wondered what had become of Harry, and whether he had succeeded or failed, but no item of news respecting him ever found its way to Graystone. As a matter of fact, the Mortons were quite forgotten; no one spoke of them now. They had never corresponded with anyone since they went away; they had left no address, and if people deliberately choose to hide themselves in that way they have no cause of complaint if they are quickly forgotten.

It was soon clear to Monica that no one excepting herself had recognised Harry on his return from prison, and as the days slipped away, and grew into weeks and months, she half wondered sometimes whether she had seen him, or whether that last strange interview with him was not all a dream. She sometimes tried to recall what she had said to him, or dreamed she had said, but she was never very successful in this. Sometimes she feared that her heart had run away with her judgment, that she had said more than she ought to have said. At other times she told herself that if she had put her scruples aside, and spoken a little more plainly, he would have

allowed her to help him, and the way might have been paved for the future happiness of both. Now she was angry with him for being so blind and stupid, and now she was angry with herself for speaking to him at all.

Meanwhile, Rupert Grant was exercising all his wiles upon Monica to get her to fix an early date for the marriage. He foresaw not only difficulty, but danger, if the wedding was not consummated soon, though what the danger was he kept resolutely to himself.

Monica, however, always had an excuse ready at hand. In truth, she kept hoping almost against hope that something would happen to prevent the marriage, something that would give her a reasonable excuse for breaking her promise. So every time that Rupert pleaded with her to fix an early date, she invented a reason for a little further delay. Nevertheless, she felt that the time was steadily drawing nearer when she would have to redeem her promise.

To flatly refuse to marry Rupert was a thought that rarely occurred to her, and when it did occur she resolutely put it aside. She would refuse readily enough if she could find sufficient reason. But to say that she had changed her mind, or that she had promised to marry him in a pet, or that he had not treated her well—no, that would never do. She had given her promise with her eyes wide open, and since that promise he had treated her with every kindness and consideration. No, there was no escape; she was in honour bound to fulfil her part of the contract. Week after week, and month after month, she had

kept putting off the evil day, but there was a limit to everything ; she would have to yield sooner or later.

Rupert got desperate at length, and pressed for a decision of some kind. He saw clearly enough that all his schemes would fail and his best hopes be dashed to the ground unless he could get the matter settled quickly. Once he could get the knot tied he would be safe. There might be tears and threats and protestations, but with Monica's banker at his back he had little doubt he would be able to settle everything satisfactorily.

At present his position was a most unpleasant one, and in a few weeks' time would be much more so, unless he played his cards with great courage and skill.

Rupert's father was just as anxious that the marriage should take place quickly as he. A young man with aristocratic tastes is an expensive luxury. He saw, too, that Rupert was worrying himself a good deal, though he did not know all the reasons for that, nor did anyone else. Rupert was careful to keep his own counsel.

As the prospective husband of Monica Stuart, and heir-presumptive to the Graystone and Menheniot estates, Rupert made no attempt to improve his financial position. It was much pleasanter to play the gentleman at Graystone than to hang about the Law Courts and Lincoln's Inn. Briefs were for impecunious wretches who had no expectations, but for heirs to earldoms they were not worth considering.

Nevertheless, it was very irritating to be in a chronic state of impecuniosity, and he was infinitely more angry with Monica than he dared reveal.

Still, he had learned to play a double part with considerable success. However annoyed he might feel he managed to keep it to himself. He was all honey and sweet words to Monica. She sometimes wondered at his patience with her, for she treated him with scant courtesy sometimes, but he never appeared to resent it. He always came up smiling and never seemed to be angry.

She began to think after awhile that he was either remarkably fond of her, or else that he was the best tempered man alive. Yet her liking for him did not grow in the smallest degree. She had given her heart to another, and there could never be any room in her affections for Rupert Grant.

It was six months after Monica's interview with Harry that Rupert pressed for a limit to be put to the time of his waiting.

"To one of my temperament, Monica," he said, "you must see that this uncertainty is very trying."

"I don't know why it should be," she answered. "You are free now to do as you like. You may not be so free afterwards."

"Ah, Monica, I am willing to risk all that, as you know. I wish you knew also how much I loved you."

"I will give you credit for being patient with me," she said, with a smile, "and I am sure you will need all your patience, for I shall be a terrible vixen when I get old."

"I am not in the least afraid of that," he said, blandly; "but what I want to know now is, Cannot you put an end to this uncertainty and fix a limit to this waiting?"

"You mean that you want me to fix the date?"

"No, I do not ask you to do that now. I simply want you to fix a maximum of time beyond which the marriage shall not be delayed."

"I am not quite certain that I see what you mean," she said, demurely.

"Well, you might say, for instance, that the marriage shall not be delayed beyond the present——"

"Century!" she interrupted.

"You are very tantalising, Monica," he said, gently; "I am sure you do not realise how I hunger to call you my wife."

"I am sorry for you," she answered; "I am sure you will find me a most unsatisfying portion."

"Let us not discuss that, please. Will you not promise me that the marriage shall take place within the present year?"

"That is within the next nine months?" she questioned.

"Yes, Monica; that gives you a large amount of margin."

"Well, I will think about it. If you are very good, perhaps I will."

"Then I may take that as a promise?"

She looked at him steadily, but did not speak.

"Silence gives consent," he said, with a gay laugh.

She still looked at him with a curious, half-pathetic light in her eyes. He was very good-looking, and certainly he had been very kind. She would have to marry him sooner or later—that seemed to be her fate. Perhaps she had better get it over.

When once she was married she would give up her day-dreams and settle down to domestic life.

"All right, Rupert," she said, at length. "Men always get their own way in the long run," and she walked across to the window and looked out over the lawn.

"I am sure you will not regret it, Monica, and you have made me very happy."

She did not reply, and soon after he took his departure.

She stood and watched him as he walked away from the house. Once he turned and smiled back at her, but she did not return the smile; she felt more like crying.

"I wonder if girls ever marry the man they love best," she said to herself, and her lips trembled in spite of herself. "I don't expect they do. They have their dreams, and they weave their romances, and after that comes the hard reality. They have to take the most eligible man that offers and make-believe all the rest. The world is terribly hard on a woman. She cannot tell a man that she loves him, and if he never speaks she must pine in silence, or later on marry some one else whom she doesn't care two straws for. I don't suppose my case is worse than millions of others, and yet a million wrongs cannot make a right. Very likely some other girl is breaking her heart for Rupert; I wish she would come and marry him by sheer force."

Meanwhile Rupert was covering the space between the Hall and the Vicarage in a state of great elation.

"She'll not want to be married in December," he said to himself, "nor in November, nor in October."

September is the very latest she can put it off, if she wants to go abroad, and very likely she'll consent to a month earlier than that. I think I'm safe now, barring accidents. That was a good move of mine to get her to fix a maximum. Let me see, it's the twenty-eighth of March to-day. If I only play my cards well we may get it over in June," and he chuckled good-humouredly.

Then his face clouded. "There'll be an awkward interval to get over in any case," he went on. "Very awkward, but I think it can be managed."

Nevertheless, the cloud did not lift from his face. His anticipations were considerably weighted by his apprehensions.

Monica was still looking with unseeing eyes across the landscape when her guardian entered the room. She did not notice his entrance, and his footfalls made no sound on the thick pile carpet.

For a moment or two he stood and looked at her. "I don't wonder Rupert is anxious to marry her," he reflected, "for she has certainly developed into a very beautiful woman. I wish he were more worthy of her. I do, upon my honour," and the Earl sighed.

A moment later Monica caught sight of him, and turned and greeted him with a kiss.

"I am sorry to break in upon your day-dreams," he said, playfully.

"You need not apologise," she answered, "I am glad to have them broken up."

"Ah!" he questioned, "I thought a maiden's day-dreams were always pleasant?"

"Then you see you are mistaken for once. Rupert has been here."

"I'm afraid I don't quite see the connection," he said, raising his eyebrows and smiling.

"And, as usual, he wants me to fix the day for the wedding."

"Which ought to prove a very pleasant task."

"But as it happens proves nothing of the kind."

"That is unfortunate."

"I am rapidly coming round to the opinion of the Apostle Paul."

"Which is?"

"That people should not marry."

"And for the same reasons that he gives?"

"I know nothing about his reasons. But I have plenty of my own."

The Earl laughed.

"Rupert is very anxious to settle down to domestic life," Monica went on.

"Well, it's about time he settled down to something," the Earl remarked, dryly.

"Yes, I think that myself, and for that reason I have set a limit."

"A limit to what?"

"To our engagement."

The Earl started. "You do not mean that you have broken with him?"

"I am sorry there is no such luck. No, I have consented that the wedding shall take place before the year is out."

"That is within the next nine months?"

"Exactly."

"Which means most likely that you will marry before the summer is over."

"No. Why should it?"

"Because, possibly, you will want to go abroad, and you will not care to travel in the dead of winter."

"I never thought of that," she answered, with a troubled look in her eyes.

"In any case a few weeks earlier or later can make no difference," the Earl remarked, reflectively.

"No. I suppose that is so," she answered, slowly, and she walked again toward the window.

Lord Menheniot took two or three turns round the room with a look of perplexity in his eyes. Then he paused suddenly by her side.

"There is one matter that I think it only right you should know before—well, before you are any older."

She turned suddenly and looked at him. His face was very grave, and his lips had become suddenly pale.

"It may not affect your actions in the smallest degree," he went on slowly and with evident effort. "Nevertheless, I think it is only right you should know. I should not like you to fall foul of me later on and say, 'You should have told me all this sooner.'"

"I cannot imagine what you are driving at," she said, with a half-frightened laugh.

"Come and sit down, Monica. I cannot explain everything in a minute."

She walked across the room slowly and dropped into an easy-chair.

"The truth is," said Lord Menheniot, speaking like a man who had braced himself to an unpleasant task and was resolved to carry it through, "I have

only recently begun to consider seriously certain contingencies, or perhaps I ought to say, rather, reconsider them. Some time ago I thought I had settled the matter once and for all. Recent events, however, have compelled me to reopen it, with the result that what I once deemed an absolute impossibility promises now to become an accomplished fact."

Monica listened to all this in open-eyed astonishment, and wondered when her guardian would condescend to come down from generalities and talk in a way that she could understand.

"I cannot say that so far I have got very much light," she said, in a tone of banter. "Perhaps I shall get at your meaning later on."

The Earl frowned, then smiled, then tugged hard at his moustache.

"I think you will understand by-and-by," he said at length. "But, as usual, you are very impatient."

"Am I? I'm dreadfully sorry. But I can assure you I'm all attention and am dying of curiosity."

"Then let me ask you a question, Monica. Would it affect your relationship with Rupert if you knew there was a possibility that he would never be Earl of Menheniot?"

"I don't know exactly what you mean," she said, leaning forward and staring hard at him.

"I just mean what I say. At present you believe, and he believes, that he is heir to the Graystone estates. But suppose it should turn out after all that he is not the heir, but that somebody else has a prior claim? Would you feel toward him as you do now?"

"I suppose so," she said, slowly, with a wondering

expression in her eyes. "I don't see how it could make any difference. You don't suppose that when I yielded to your request and his that I was influenced by the prospect of a title, do you?"

"Well, Monica, it seems to me that it might have been a factor in the case."

"Then I assure you it was not. The chief thing was that you wanted me to marry him. He seemed as good as any one else and better than most, and so—well, I consented."

"Then you are not ambitious for a title?"

"Ambitious? I have wished scores of times I was only a farmer's daughter."

The Earl smiled and looked relieved. Then a somewhat awkward silence fell between them. Lord Menheniot had evidently more to say, though he seemed somewhat at a loss how to say it.

At length he turned suddenly and said, "I think it only fair, Monica, that I should give you my complete confidence in this matter. I know I may trust you not to say anything until I give you permission."

"I will respect your wishes," she said, quietly.

"Very good," and after another moment of silence the Earl began his story.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONFESSION.

“It is a common enough story,” the Earl began, “and though I have kept it secret for five-and-twenty years, I am not certain that I altogether regret it or am ashamed of it. I was a young man then, and, like other young men, had my romantic days. I was but a simple ‘Mr.’ without a thought of ever bearing a title, for my father at that time had no idea, I think, of being anything more than a life peer. Well, I fell in love and married without my father’s consent. My wife was pretty and good, and for two years we lived as happily together as, I fancy, ordinary people do in this world. Then she died, leaving a week-old baby. I knew nothing about her people; they were only ordinary working folk as I understood, but they took charge of the little fellow and promised to bring him up, I, of course, to supply all the funds necessary for the purpose. But a few months later I was told that the child was dead. So ended my early romance. As you know, later on I married my present wife, but now comes the strange part of the story. A year or two ago I found out by accident that the baby did not die as I had been told, that, on the contrary, he had grown up to be a strong and healthy man. Then came the question, What should I do? Should I acknowledge to the

world my early and secret marriage, and make this unknown young man my heir, or should I let him remain in the position in which he had been brought up and for which he was fitted, and allow Rupert Grant to come into possession of Graystone at my—and his father's, decease?

“This was a question that perplexed me very considerably, and for a long time I hesitated, now swaying to one side and now to the other. It might not be an altogether kind thing to lift the lad from the surroundings in which he had been reared, and place him in a position for which he was not fitted, while it would be a terrible disappointment to Rupert, who naturally looked forward to being lord of Graystone.

“Moreover, there were many other considerations that I need not mention, which at length decided me to let matters remain just as they were. I concluded that the young man would be happier in the condition in which he had been reared; that never having any expectations he would not be disappointed; that Rupert also would do credit to the name, and that, all things considered, I had better keep my secret to myself.

“But somehow or other a change has come over my feelings. They say, you know, that blood is thicker than water. It is so, no doubt. I cannot but feel that my own child has the first claim upon me. Whether it be a kind thing to search for him, and lift him into this position or not, is not for me to say; it is simply a question of right and justice. Day by day I am steadily reaching the conviction that my own son must have his proper place whatever the consequences may be.

"It may be trying for me to confess to the world the story of my early romance; it will, no doubt, awaken a great deal of talk, and be the subject of endless gossip in all ranks of Society. That I must face. Somehow, Monica, we never fully escape the consequences of any of our actions; sooner or later we have to reap the harvest of our doings, and I can see clearly enough that soon or late I shall have to face the inevitable, and restore my own child to his rightful position."

During this recital Monica sat with her hands clasped across her knee staring into the fire. She did not interrupt the Earl by a single question; she allowed him to go on to the end of his story; then fell a somewhat prolonged silence. The Earl looked at her steadily, but she did not raise her eyes to his.

"I know you are greatly surprised," he said, at length, "but I felt it only right that you should know."

"I thank you for telling me," she said, "though I do not know that I am very greatly surprised; it takes a good deal to surprise people nowadays."

"And you do not blame me for thinking that my own son has the first claim upon me?"

"No, I do not blame you at all, though I think, perhaps, it would have been better if you had taken this step directly you discovered that your son was alive."

"There were so many contingencies to be faced," he said, flushing slightly, "that I thought I had better consider all sides of the question first."

"And Rupert knows nothing of this?" she questioned.

"Not yet," he answered; "of course I shall tell him everything later on."

"And when will you bring this son of yours to Graystone?" she asked, after a pause.

"That I cannot tell. I do not know at present where he is, and I may have some difficulty in finding him."

"Directly you find him of course you will bring him home?"

"Well, I hope I may be able to do so," he answered, with some hesitation; "of course, there are many matters in a case like this that require adjustment. It is impossible to foresee all the difficulties that may arise."

"I presume your son will not raise any difficulty," Monica said, with just a touch of cynicism in her tone.

"I presume not," he answered; "of course, I cannot tell yet; everything depends upon his disposition and the way he looks at the question."

"It is not often," she said, "that people knowingly put hindrances in the way of their good fortune."

"He may not consider it good fortune," the Earl answered, slowly.

"Oh, won't he?" she replied, with a little toss of her head; "it is the one thing the world goes mad over. To be rich, to live in big houses, seems to be the one ambition of people. They do not think that they may be just as miserable with money as without it, and that there may be just as much misery in a mansion as in a cottage. If they only knew, they would not be so eager in their race for riches. But there, what is the use of talking?"

"Then you will not be altogether sorry for Rupert?" he questioned.

"Oh, I don't know; he looks at things from a different standpoint. I think I am very sorry for him. He has built so much upon it, he has considered himself so long to be the heir to the Graystone estates, it will be a great disappointment to him."

"No doubt it will. I confess that Rupert has been my principal difficulty in the case. But please do not say a word to him of what I have told you. I want to do all that myself."

"I shall say nothing to him about the matter," she answered.

"Of course," he said, rising slowly to his feet and making a movement toward the door, "this makes a considerable difference in your prospects as well."

"You need not consider me in the matter in the least," she answered; "I have no desire to be the bearer of a title; I am quite content as I am."

"And you think it will make no difference in your relationship to Rupert?" he asked, with some hesitation.

"I do not see why it should," she replied; "indeed, I think I shall like him all the better in misfortune," and she turned and stared into the fire again.

When the Earl had left the room she rose to her feet, and began to pace slowly up and down, with her hands locked behind her back and her head bent slightly forward. She felt that the story to which she had listened would mean a great deal to her. If

the Earl was going to bring to Graystone a young man, it might be of doubtful antecedents, of defective education, possibly a mere country clown, then her position might be a very uncomfortable one. Day by day she would have to be thrown into his company whether she liked it or no. She would have to meet him at table, to sit with him possibly in the drawing-room, to be thrown into intimate contact with him in a dozen different ways. He might be vulgar and aggressive and impertinent. He might even try to make love to her. Indeed, she saw, or fancied she saw, that this new arrival at Graystone might make her life almost intolerable.

"Perhaps it is a good thing I have promised to marry Rupert," she said to herself at length; "it will be an escape for me, and my fortune will be some compensation for him. Poor Rupert, I do feel sorry for him after all. It will be a terrible disappointment." Then she sat down and stared into the fire again.

"If he wants to get married soon," she said to herself at length, with a weary, wistful expression in her eyes, "I don't think I will raise any more objections. I have promised to marry him before the year is out. Perhaps the sooner it is over the better. I shall escape from Graystone and the company of the young man who is to be brought here; and really everything seems to be conspiring to the same end. I think it must be my fate, and it is of no use trying to resist, and it is of less use complaining. I had better make the best of it. Perhaps I shall be happier than I think. Rupert professes to be very fond of me, and I think he does like me a good deal.

I sometimes wonder at his patience, for I fear I have not treated him very well on the whole."

Then by a quick transition her thoughts ran off to Harry Morton, and she found herself in imagination walking with him again across the fields, and listening to his voice, which was always as music in her ears; but she was quickly brought back to her present surroundings, and with a little sigh she said, "If I had never seen Harry, perhaps everything would have been different. Perhaps I shall forget him when I am Rupert's wife. Most people have their little romance when they are young, but they grow out of it, they say. Perhaps I shall grow out of this." And with a resolute air she got up and went off to the library, and fetching a book sat down to read.

A few weeks later, when she and Rupert were walking home from church one Sunday evening, he broached the subject again which seemed ever uppermost in his mind.

"I have been thinking, Monica," he said, "that it would be much better if we got married early in the year. We cannot travel abroad in winter; but if we got married in the summer we might spend a long holiday on the Continent. Think how pleasant it would be rambling from place to place."

"I don't think we need a holiday very much, Rupert," she said, with a smile; "at any rate, in your case you seem to have had a perpetual holiday for the last year or two."

"Now, please don't be unkind," he said, with a laugh. "I have really worked harder than you think."

"I am glad to hear that you have been working at all," she said; "if you have been really working hard, then of course you deserve a holiday."

"And don't you think we may go away together?" he questioned.

"Well, perhaps we may if you are very good," she said, a little shyly.

"Have you thought of a possible date?" he questioned.

"No, I cannot say I have," she replied; "the truth is, I do not think any more about the matter than I can help."

"But there is no real objection, is there, why we may not be married soon?" he questioned.

"No, I do not think there is any formidable objection," she replied.

"Well, it is April now," he said. "How long do you require to get ready?"

"Well, you might allow me two months, at least," she replied.

"Then we will say toward the end of June?" he questioned, delightedly.

"Yes, if you particularly wish it," she answered.

"Oh, Monica, you are a darling," he cried, impulsively; "you have made me the happiest man on earth."

"I hope you will always be as happy, Rupert," she said; "I will try my best to be a good wife to you."

"I am sure you will, Monica," he replied, with effusion; "and I will be so good to you that you will never regret our marriage to the day of your death."

"I trust we shall neither of us regret it," she

answered, looking away across the distant fields, "but we had better not build too much upon it. Blessed are they who expect little, you know, for they shall not be disappointed."

"Nay, rather blessed are they who expect much," he answered; and, when he had seen Monica safely in the house, he hurried home to the vicarage to tell his father and mother that the wedding was to take place at the end of June.

During the next few weeks preparations went gaily forward for the wedding, though it was decided for many reasons that it should be a quiet affair. Lady Menheniot, being such a confirmed invalid, could not, of course, take part in the ceremony. Moreover, Rupert himself seemed anxious that it should not be a very public function. For some reason or other, of late he had changed his views, and declared that he believed in quiet weddings, the quieter the better; the fewer the people that knew of it the more he would be pleased; and, as this view coincided exactly with Monica's, it was decided that very few people should be invited, and that all announcements as far as possible should be kept out of the press.

So, without any fuss or ostentation, the preparations steadily proceeded. Monica was quietly interested; on the whole, she was glad that a date had been fixed. She seemed more at her ease and more content now that her fate seemed to be definitely sealed. She did her best, also, to discover in Rupert qualities that were by no means conspicuous. She tried to look with kindly eyes on his failings, and to magnify all his virtues. That he was exceedingly

kind to her no one could deny. Moreover, all agreed that in the main he was a handsome and manly fellow, such a young man as most girls would be proud of.

She received the congratulations of her few friends with quiet resignation, but she never manifested the least enthusiasm. She had an idea that the world was a vast sacrificial altar, and that one half of the human race was offered up in atonement for the sins of the other half. As it happened, she was one of the victims; she belonged to that half that had to suffer. For whose sins or wrong-doings she had to pay the penalty she did not know, nor did it matter very much. She only felt that if everybody had done right she would not be in her present position. But wrong had been done somewhere, wrong had been done to Harry, wrong had been done to herself, wrong had been done to Rupert it might be. Perhaps, in some way that she did not understand, she had done wrong herself. Now she had to pay the price either of her own wrong-doing or of somebody else's.

She tried to look at the matter as philosophically as possible; she hoped that she was doing some good. Her guardian seemed to be exceedingly pleased at the arrangement; he regarded her marriage as compensation for Rupert. He would not get the title, it is true, but he would have the handling of her considerable wealth, while he, the Earl, would be able to bring home his own son now without any compunction of conscience.

Monica seemed rather surprised that he did not

appear during the wedding preparations to make any effort to find his son.

"He is waiting until I have taken my departure," she would sometimes say to herself; "perhaps after all it is best. I am not at all anxious to see this wonderful individual who has lived in obscurity all his life and now is to be raised to fortune, and I can understand that Guardy is anxious to put off the evil day as long as possible."

Now and then, in spite of herself, her thoughts wandered away to Harry Morton, and she wondered if he were failing in the struggle of life, or if somewhere he was fighting his way to success, but she thought that the latter was hardly probable.

"If he were succeeding I think he would let me know in some way," she would say to herself, "but as he does not let me know, and keeps himself out of sight, I think the chances are that he is failing. Poor Harry, I wish I could help him. He is another who is offered up on the world's great sacrificial altar; he, too, is paying the price of another's sin. It is a strange world, and I do not understand it. Perhaps there is another life where the wrongs of this shall be rectified, where those who have suffered shall receive compensation."

So the days gradually slipped away and grew into weeks. The spring ripened into summer, and Graystone never looked more beautiful, the trees were never in richer foliage, never did the flowers bloom more abundantly. It was an ideal summer, and Monica tried to regard it as in some way the promise and prophecy of her future life.

As the time drew near for the wedding Rupert became more and more restless. He took frequent journeys to London ostensibly to look after the house that the Earl had taken for them in Bayswater, but really to look after matters that more nearly concerned himself. Monica could not fail to notice his restlessness. Now and then she chided him about it, and he would laughingly answer her that he felt he was undeserving of so much happiness, and was almost afraid sometimes that he might wake up and find it all a dream. But, even while a gay laugh was on his lips, she was quick to note an apprehensive glance in his eyes and an alertness in his manner that she could not understand.

At length it wanted but a week to the wedding, and everything was in readiness for the ceremony. Nearly all her dresses were completed; the London house had been partly furnished by Rupert and her guardian. Once or twice she herself had gone up to look after matters and choose the furniture and carpets. It was arranged that after the ceremony they should go for a week into Scotland; then they would return to London to their own house and spend a few weeks, after which they would go on the Continent and remain until the autumn, when they would come back and complete the furnishing of their dwelling.

Monica was alone in the drawing-room, and as usual she was thinking.

"One week more," she was saying to herself, "and the old life will be over for ever, and my destiny will be fixed irrevocably. Only another week, and all

the dreams I have cherished will be at an end. Well, better so, better so."

Then a knock came to the door. She looked up with a startled expression; the next moment the door was thrown open, and a tall, handsome and well-dressed lady advanced timidly toward her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AGAINST THE TIDE.

MEANWHILE Harry Morton was experiencing the common lot of those who are "down." It seemed to him sometimes as if the whole world had entered into a conspiracy against him. He had tried his best, and again and again he appeared to be on the highway to success, but the sequel was always the same. No sooner did he get two or three steps up the ladder than some one kicked it away from under him, and he found himself at the bottom once more, stunned and bruised by the fall.

It was a constant surprise to him that just at the most inopportune moment, as far as he was concerned, it was always discovered that he had been in gaol. He made a fresh start in almost every part of London, and it seemed impossible that among so many millions any one should recognise him or know anything about him; yet London proved but a small place after all. Try as he would he could never hide himself for very long together.

At first he resolved that he would stick to his own name and face it out, but he soon changed his mind. It was wonderful what a memory some people had for names. The great forgery case might have been a matter of yesterday. And the mere mention of his

name recalled the whole circumstance to many people's minds in a moment.

But he fared very little better under an *alias*. The truth always came out sooner or later, and the truth was fatal to his advancement. Men refused to work with him, and employers unceremoniously dismissed him from their warehouse or yard. The fact that he was a good servant and attended diligently to his work did not avail him in the least. "Once a rogue, always a rogue," seemed to be the world's motto, and Harry was given little or no chance of proving that he was an honest man.

He could nearly always get work of a kind somewhere. There are a few occupations in London in which character is not the first consideration. It is not necessary, for instance, that a man shall bear a blameless reputation before he can be a sandwich man. As a matter of fact, that is almost the last refuge of the characterless. There are people, also, who wait round theatres and restaurants and open doors of cabs, others who sweep crossings or deal in bones or old clothes, to whom a first-rate reference is not a matter of vital importance.

Still, the man who cannot command a good character finds that his choice of occupation is strictly limited. The crossing-sweeper bears no relationship to the official scavenger, and the dustman looks down with more or less of contempt upon the man who wheels a coster's barrow. Harry tried in vain to get what may be termed official recognition—to penetrate to that inner circle of labour. He had not realised before how universal was caste.

As a working man his manner and education were

against him. It was evident to every one that he was not to the manner born. Working men regard with suspicion the intrusion of a gentleman into their ranks. Generally speaking he does not come from choice, and just as frequently he does not stay from choice.

In the space of twelve months Harry played many parts. He tried his hand at reporting when he first went up to London, and was on the point of getting a permanent post when he was found out. Then he betook himself to the British Museum and worked up several popular articles for popular magazines, one of which he got accepted; then somebody recognised him. Then he turned to carrying a hod during the day, and to writing fiction at night, and in six months he had made such a hit with two short stories that he was invited out to dinner. Foolishly he accepted the invitation, for he was pining for just a breath of educated society. Long before the evening was over a whisper ran round the room. Within half an hour of the start of that whisper he was as much shunned as if he had small-pox. After that his stories were returned to him.

He stuck to the hod, for it meant bread and cheese. Then the timekeeper fell ill, and he applied for the post and got it. A week later he was dismissed. Somebody had recognised him.

If he could have been content to remain in the outer circle of labour, he would have experienced fewer vicissitudes. But he was not content. He wanted something better. The words of Monica constantly rang in his ears—"If I were a man I would conquer the world," and he wanted to prove

to her that he was a man, worthy of her confidence and trust, and that though they never met again she might hear afar off that he had played his part bravely and won.

But he lost heart after a while. A man may bear up under one reverse or ten. But the constant dropping wears away the stone. Besides, he lacked the hope and inspiration of an earlier time. The idea of ever winning Monica had yielded to the inevitable. He could not save her. She could not or would not save herself. For all he knew she was already Rupert Grant's wife. Her destiny was sealed. So was his. It was of no use fighting against fate. He might as well drift with the tide and make the best of it. Two years' imprisonment meant a lifetime's doom. The real punishment begins when the term expires. The reason why discharged prisoners return again to the cells is easy of explanation. There is nothing else for them. The outside world will not give them a chance.

Harry sometimes wished that his sentence had been for life. He was just as solitary in the crowd as in the cell, with a hundred cares and anxieties that an inside prisoner does not feel.

One hot afternoon early in June he was loitering along the shady side of Cheapside. The pavements were thronged with people, and all the street was gay with colour and movement. He had been unable to earn anything for three whole days, consequently he was feeling more than usually depressed. The rapidly shifting panorama of human life which, generally speaking, exhilarated, now saddened him. Everyone appeared to have something to do but himself.

All were eager and alert, intent on some mission or enterprise. He alone slouched along without aim, with no end soever in view.

Suddenly, amid the thronging mass of vehicles, an open landau appeared, drawn by two spanking chestnut horses, resplendent in gold-mounted harness. The driver and footman were faultlessly dressed in light grey livery, and wore cockades in their hats. In the carriage sat two gentlemen, the one short, stout, florid, the other taller and thinner, and with a less florid complexion. The short man was the younger of the two, and apparently the happier; his face beamed with merriment, his full eyes sparkled with good humour.

The older man looked less healthy than his companion; perhaps that was the reason he looked less happy. His face was puffy, especially under the eyes, which were dull and heavy, as though he had dined late and not too wisely. His mouth was pulled down at the corners, which gave him a melancholy expression.

Both men were exceedingly well dressed. Their silk hats might have been lifted out of the bandbox that afternoon for the first time. They wore scarves of the same style, each adorned with a massive diamond pin which literally blazed in the sunshine. Their hands were encased in well-fitting kid gloves.

All this Harry took in in a moment. Then his eyes became riveted on the older man. Was it true that every man has his double? Here was Robert Morton with a slight difference—a difference between opulence and impecuniosity, between the man who

lived sparely and abstemiously and the man who ate and drank more than was good for him.

"Of course it is not my father," Harry said to himself; "he would never drive in an open carriage and wear a diamond pin and dress in the height of fashion; besides, father is a much thinner man, with a keener look in his eyes, and yet they might be twin brothers, so closely do they resemble one another."

The street was so thronged with vehicles that progress was necessarily slow, and Harry had plenty of time to take stock of the man who so reminded him of Robert Morton.

It is said by some that eyes have a magnetic influence, and that if you look at a man intently enough from behind he will at length become conscious of it and will turn his head to see. It may be so.

Harry stared at the man in the carriage until he turned his head and their eyes met. It was a swift, searching glance on the part of each, but no sign of recognition passed.

Harry stood against a lamp-post and stared after the carriage, and while he did so two gentlemen passed him talking loudly.

"I tell you they are two of the biggest scoundrels in London," one was saying to the other, "and I can prove it."

"I wish you would prove it," the other replied; "it is quite time somebody put an end to their game."

Harry turned quickly and followed them.

"Give them a little more rope," the first speaker said, "and they will hang themselves yet."

"But the mischief is, they hang thousands of other people at the same time."

"You can't help that. If the British public will be gulled, and if some of those who are supposed to direct public opinion are open to bribes, why the penalty will have to be paid. Everything has its price, but the day of reckoning will come."

Harry pressed forward and strained his ears to catch more, but the crowd intervened, and a few minutes later the gentlemen were lost to sight.

At the end of the street he turned into St. Paul's Churchyard, and, having nothing else to do, he mounted the steps and passed through the doors into the Cathedral, and stealing to an empty chair in the shadow of a pillar he sat down.

For several minutes he took no notice of anyone and no one noticed him. It was deliciously cool after the glare of the streets, and so delightfully restful. The roar of the streets came faint and subdued, like the murmur of the sea when the tide is low; and the light that stole in through the dusty and many-coloured windows was sweet and refreshing to the tired eyes.

After a while he began to look around him. There were hundreds of people scattered here and there, mostly from the country. He could tell that by the way they stared about them. A few had grown tired with shopping, and had come in to rest, and a limited few had come in for silent meditation and prayer.

Harry grew interested at length in watching the people slouching idly round the building. If he wanted to meet people from the country this was

just the place to come. St. Paul's was one of the show places of the great city, and those who came to London for the first time invariably made their way thither.

He began to scan the faces at length with interest, but there was no one he knew. He had scarcely seen a familiar face since he came to London.

He was just about to go forth into the street again when a whispered name fell upon his ear.

"Come, Monica, I think you have played country cousin long enough, and we have a lot of shopping to do yet."

He leaned forward with a start, and glanced timidly round a projection of the huge pillar, and there, not three yards from him, sat Monica and Lord Menheniot.

They were looking away from him, so that he was able to scan their faces unobserved. Nine months had passed since they had last met, but she had not changed in the least. She was just as beautiful as ever.

The blood rushed to his face in a torrent, and his heart was throbbing at fever speed.

"Come, Monica," the Earl repeated in a whisper, "you know we promised to meet Rupert at Maple's not later than six."

"Yes, I know," she whispered wearily; "I wish you and Rupert would do the furnishing between you."

"But it is for your house, Monica."

"Yes, I know," and she rose and followed the Earl down the aisle.

Harry sat still and stared after them, and long after they had disappeared he kept staring in the same direction.

He pulled himself together at length, and leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. "It is only what I might have expected," he said, "they have returned from their honeymoon, and are now busy house furnishing, and already he goes one way and she goes another. But I knew how it would be. Poor Monica! Better she were buried," and he rose and hurried out into the sunshine.

A week later Harry sat exploring the mysteries of a sausage in a small, and not over-clean, eating-house in Fetter Lane. He was in no hurry to reach the end of his explorations, for he was dead tired as well as hungry, and it was pleasant to sit and rest awhile out of the eye of the sun. On a form near him lay a week-old newspaper. He picked it up and glanced at it carelessly, then with a look of intense interest. The name Morton had caught his eye.

A new company was being floated by Morton and Fletcher with a capital of £780,000. Then followed some caustic comments on the nature of the speculation.

Harry read on till he reached a paragraph that professed to deal with the past history of Robert Morton, the great company promoter. It had been said that he had been apprenticed as a lad to a stock-broker in the City, and that his life had been lived in the atmosphere of finance. But this writer had reason to believe that the opposite of this was the truth. There was, in fact, a well-founded report abroad that at one time he had been a country school-master. Certain it was that until the last three years he had never been heard of on the London Stock Exchange. Since then his career had been

more wonderful than any romance ever penned. He had the touch of Midas. Riches had rolled in upon him. He had floated company after company with astounding success. Baronets and earls, and even dukes it was said, besieged his office. Titled ladies were ready to go on their knees to him.

"But how long is this going to last?" the writer asked. Then followed further criticism of a severe kind, ending with a thinly-veiled prophecy that the bubble would burst, and at no distant date.

Harry read the column a second time with growing interest. Then he hunted up some other papers in the room and read them, and strangely enough there was not a single paper that did not contain some reference to Morton and Fletcher.

In the street he bought a halfpenny evening paper. He could ill afford it, but his curiosity had been aroused, and the first name his eye rested upon was that of Robert Morton.

He returned to his lodgings that night in a strange unrest. He had no doubt now as to who it was he had seen in the open carriage in Cheapside.

"And this is the reward of sin," he reflected—"the innocent pay the price, the guilty go free; the honest man is sent to gaol, the rogue flourishes like a green bay tree. I wonder where Providence comes in?"

"At any rate," he went on, after a long pause, "I shall surely be able to discover the whereabouts of this respected parent of mine now. I've been searching for him long enough, but in the wrong place. I expected to find him—if I ever did find

him—in the East-end, and, lo! he is in the West—not in Whitechapel, but in Mayfair.”

A few days later Harry might have been seen toiling up the heights of Hampstead. He had discovered Robert Morton’s address, and was determined to have another interview with him. No good might come out of it, but at any rate it would gratify his curiosity, and then he was pining to see Madge. Next to Monica he loved Madge better than any one else in the world.

It was a long pull across the Heath from Hampstead station; but the sight of green turf was as balm to his tired eyes, the fresh breeze like nectar. On the ridge of the hill he paused, and a low exclamation of surprise burst from his lips. He had not expected such a vision of the country.

Firdale was not difficult to find, and in a short time the yellow gravel of the well-kept drive was crunching under his feet. He felt very strange and out of place, nor could he help wondering what kind of reception he would get. He looked down almost with a feeling of dismay at his threadbare clothes; but they were the best he had. Yet he looked a gentleman notwithstanding. He carried himself with a grace and dignity that nothing could rob him of, and though his face was thin and sunburnt, he was handsome still.

A turn in the drive, and the large house came full into sight. Harry gave a little gasp.

“Heavens,” he said, “can it be possible that he has risen to this?”

How little we understand the meaning of words. It was to this he had fallen.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE POISON WORKS.

ROBERT MORTON recognised Harry in Cheapside in spite of his shabby appearance, and though he made no sign he felt very uncomfortable and remained during the day in a state of considerable unrest. Try as he would he could not banish the haunting look that was in Harry's eyes. During the last few months he had almost succeeded in excluding him from his mind. During the first week or two after his release he was always on the look out for him. He felt sure that he would get to know his whereabouts sooner or later and look him up. But as the weeks and months passed away, and Harry had made no sign, he concluded that he had gone abroad. "And a very proper thing to do," he reflected, "and I sincerely hope I shall never be troubled by him again."

Hence, the sight of Harry in Cheapside was somewhat disconcerting. It showed him, first, that Harry had not left the country; second, that his struggle to win back his old position had ended in failure; and third, that at any moment they might be brought face to face in mutual recognition.

This was not a pleasant prospect. He had quite enough to worry him without this. He regarded Harry as his enemy. It is said that people never

forgive those whom they have wronged. This was quite true of Robert Morton. Harry was a disturber of his peace, therefore his foe. He dreaded a meeting with him far more than with the London harpies who every day were swooping down upon him.

Robert Morton went home to a sumptuous dinner, but he did not enjoy it. As a matter of fact he enjoyed nothing now. He looked at Madge's pale face and sorrowful eyes, and his heart smote him. He was sacrificing her as he had sacrificed Harry, and where the sacrifice would end he did not know. These were only a part of the price to be paid for his sin.

And the trouble of it was that in sacrificing others he was not exempting himself, or at least he was only staving off the evil day. He might fling one after another to the wolves until every member of his family was sacrificed, but in the end he would have to share the same fate. As time passed away this became with him a settled conviction.

He fought against the idea for a long time with desperate energy. It seemed like an admission that his pessimistic philosophy was false, and that the underlying principles of Christianity were true; but the facts of his own experience were too strong for him. He had sacrificed Harry, he was sacrificing Madge, but he had escaped no pang himself. If he had escaped prison he had not escaped torture, far worse than anything that prison discipline could inflict.

It seemed to him that justice refused any and every substitute. The sacrifice of the innocent would not appease. He might fling his children upon the

altar, but they could not atone for him ; he was only adding thereby to the burden of his guilt, he would have to pay the heavier price later on.

He would have been glad to believe in an atonement wrought out for him by another—by Harry, for instance, or Madge—but he could not. Punishing the innocent somehow made no amends, it only made things worse. Wrong could not be atoned for by another wrong. Every man had to bear his own burden, to reap what he had sown.

Robert Morton was thinking bitterly, at the very hour that Harry was drawing near to the house, that he was reaping the harvest of his doing, and a very abundant harvest it was. In the eyes of the world he had gained much, and the world generally believed that he had gained it by recognised business methods. There were a few who knew better, who saw the inwardness of his transactions, and who had the power to blackmail him to any extent.

Outwardly, of course, he was prosperous enough—people spoke of him as being almost a millionaire ; but he knew that financially he was walking across a quaking bog. Indeed, he did not know where he was, or how long the illusion might last.

During the first year of his London life, by what seemed a happy stroke of luck, he had won a small fortune, and luck had appeared to attend him ever since. In the first flush of his success he fancied himself a born financier. In London men crowded about him, fawned upon him, flattered him, professed friendship of the highest and most abiding kind. He fancied that, in the slang of the time, he knew his way about, but he soon discovered that he was the

merest novice, that in the hands of these London men he was but as a child. They got his secrets from him; probed all his methods; took his true measure. Then, when they realised fully the strength of the man with whom they had to deal, they turned upon him, and demanded compensation for their silence, or payment for their help.

He was not long in discovering that he had allowed himself to drift helplessly into the hands of a band of sharpers. Amongst the cleverest of these was Sir George Hardwood. He had befriended Sir George in the early days of his business speculations; at least, so he had been taught to believe; now, however, the tables were turned; he was in the baronet's hands completely. Sir George knew more about him than any other man, and had greater power over him; hence, when the baronet demanded the hand of Madge, on the condition of his silence, he was forced to consent.

It is true he was greatly flattered at first at the idea of his daughter marrying into the ranks of the aristocracy. In a sense also, it was a happy stroke of luck. If Sir George became his son-in-law, then, for the sake of Madge and the family name, he would keep quiet. Blackmail would be out of the question when Madge was Sir George's wife.

So Robert favoured his suit, and was anxious that the wedding should take place at as early a date as possible. The sooner Madge became his wife, the sooner he would be out of the baronet's power. When once the relationship was established, he would no longer be in fear of the aristocratic financier,

It was Sir George's carriage that Harry had seen in Cheapside. It was Robert Morton's prospective son-in-law who sat by his side. It was not surprising, perhaps, that the Baronet looked so entirely satisfied with himself, that his face beamed so pleasantly, and his eyes shone with so much mirth. He had played his cards with great skill, and had won his hand. It was equally natural that Robert Morton should look sad-eyed and depressed. His prosperity was entirely in appearance. When men spoke of his great haul in this direction, and that, they knew little or nothing of the leeches that had fastened upon him on every side, and were draining the very blood from his veins. As a matter of fact, only an infinitesimal portion of those hauls went into his own pockets.

Moreover, he was an inefficient business man, and knew so little about bookkeeping, and finance generally, that his books were in a state of absolute chaos. He was literally living from hand to mouth, was compelled to embark on fresh adventures for the purpose of finding money to pay off old liabilities. When the day came that he found it impossible to launch any fresh scheme, then he knew that the day of his financial greatness would be at an end.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that with all his apparent prosperity, Robert Morton drove through the streets of London a dejected man. He often looked back upon the days he spent in Graystone, and deemed himself a far happier man then than now. He might be poor and hard-pressed for money; but at least he had maintained up to then his self-respect. Now, while he despised the

sharpers who were all about him, he despised himself more. He felt in his own heart that he had not only played the rogue, but he had played the fool.

His first wrong-doing had passed undiscovered, that had given him confidence to pursue the same methods. For three years in London he had in appearance flourished abundantly, but his fortune, such as it was, had been built up on a foundation of intrigue and falsehood and injustice and double-dealing, and he knew that any moment the whole structure might come down with a crash and bury him beneath it. Every day of his life he felt as though he were walking on the edge of a volcano, and when he went to bed at night it was with a fear gnawing at his heart that the volcano might burst into flame before morning.

The sight of Harry had stirred a thousand memories in his brain. What would he not give for the old days of quietness and peace. He literally pined at times for a quiet corner somewhere, away from the noise of the world, where he could live undisturbed and be at rest. If he could only forget the past, blot out the memory of what he had done, and get somewhere where no haunting fear of the future could disturb him, he might still be a happy man. But, alas! memory would assert itself, and imagination kept picturing a tragic future.

Up to the time of his coming to London he had been an exceedingly temperate man; wine and spirits he scarcely ever tasted. But new society wrought a change in his habits. Late dinners became the occasion of much wine-drinking. He easily fell

into the custom of those with whom he mixed. He argued with himself that it was policy, when in Rome, to do as the Romans did.

So he got into the habit of having expensive wines with his dinner and of taking whisky-and-water before he went to bed. He had not much liking for these things when he began, but the taste grew upon him imperceptibly and almost unconsciously until he found himself constantly craving for stimulants. A bottle of wine seemed to drown his care. Under the influence of alcohol he forgot the worries of the day, ceased to be haunted by painful memories and by still more painful forebodings. So the habit of constantly nipping grew upon him.

This to a man who had been abstemious all his life was damaging to both health and intellect, to say nothing of morals. It was no matter of surprise, therefore, that Harry scarcely recognised him, so great was the change that three years had wrought.

On the evening that Harry visited him he retired to his own room directly after dinner, and had a bottle of wine brought to him.

Notwithstanding the glorious summer weather he felt miserable and depressed. He was haunted by an uncomfortable foreboding that something was about to happen; and he looked to the wine to restore him to a better tone and temper of mind.

Harry pulled at the door-bell timidly, and after sending in his name was shown at once into the presence of the man he had so long called his father.

Robert Morton rose to receive him, but he did not

offer to shake hands, he showed no sign of pleasure, he stood and waited for his nephew to speak. Harry was more struck than ever with the change that had come over him. His hands shook painfully, his step seemed unsteady, his eyes were lustreless, his cheeks flabby.

For several moments there was a very awkward and painful silence. Robert Morton seemed much the more disconcerted of the two.

"Well, father," Harry said, at length, "you do not seem greatly pleased to see me."

Robert Morton leered at him for a moment, then raised his head and smiled superciliously. "You are evidently labouring under a delusion in one respect, if not in another," he said; "I wish to say that I am not your father."

"Not my father?" Harry questioned, in astonishment.

"No. You are the unfortunate brat of a dead sister of mine."

"Then why was I not told this sooner?"

"Because we had respect for your feelings, and had you not got into disgrace you would still have been treated as my son."

Harry brushed his hand slowly across his eyes, as though scarcely able to credit his senses. "Got into disgrace?" he questioned, slowly. "Have you forgotten that I have been paying, and am paying still, the penalty of your sin?"

"You failed to convince an English judge and jury of that fact, I think," Robert said, mockingly, and he poured out another glass of wine, and drank it off at a gulp.

"I failed," Harry gasped. "You—you——" But no word strong enough came to his assistance.

Robert Morton smiled as if enjoying his triumph.

"I am sorry for you, of course," he went on, after helping himself to another glass of wine; "it was, in fact, a great blow to us all. But I was bound to proclaim, as you can well understand, that you were not my son."

"You were ashamed of me, of course?"

"Naturally," and Robert Morton looked at him with bold, unflinching eyes.

Harry walked to the nearest chair and sat down. He was staggered, bewildered, amazed. The man's effrontery almost took away his breath.

"It is a relief to me at any rate," he said, at length, "to know that I am saved the humiliation of being your son."

"Then the relief is mutual," Robert said, with a smile.

"And you have no apology, no regret for the cruel wrong you have done me?"

For a moment the elder man's eyes blazed; then he smiled again in a pitying way. "You still cling to that delusion, I see."

"Delusion?" Harry demanded. "Have you lost all moral sense? Have you fallen so low that—that——"

"I hope you did not come here to insult me?" the other interrupted; "if so, this interview had better end at once."

"Yes, I will be glad to end it," Harry answered, rising to his feet. "But let me have the name of my father. I have borne your name all too long."

"That is quite true, quite true," Robert answered, mildly. "But I have all particulars here in my desk. I have expected this meeting," and he went and opened a drawer, and began to draw out several papers. "Here are your mother's marriage lines, as she called them, and all other particulars, as far as I know them. I should also say that your mother left one hundred pounds in cash, which I will return to you. I shall have pleasure, also, in adding a couple of hundred to it to help you out. If you will wait a moment I will write a cheque for you."

"I presume my keep cost you much more than a hundred pounds?" Harry questioned, taking the papers Robert handed to him.

"Well, yes, rather more," was the quiet answer.

"Then I will not take a farthing from you, not a farthing; I would rather starve. I know how you have come by the money you possess, and such money must carry a curse with it."

"You are highly moral for one who has spent two years in gaol," Robert said, mockingly, and his eyes gleamed like a beast at bay.

"If you don't end your life there you will have much to be thankful for," was the quick reply.

Robert winced, and his flabby cheeks perceptibly reddened.

"I do not wish to bandy words with you," he said, at length, "and I am sorry you refuse my help. I want to prove that, notwithstanding your disgrace, I am anxious to do the best I can for you."

"This is adding insult to injury," Harry exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "If you were not an

old man I would kick you. But my turn will come, and perhaps sooner than you think," and walking to the door he pulled it open and passed out into the hall.

Robert touched a bell, and a servant at once appeared and bowed Harry out of the house.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WELCOME MEETING.

THE long summer day was gently fading, and under the trees the twilight was beginning to creep, when Harry emerged into the open air. His cheeks were flushed, and through his veins the blood was coursing at fever-heat. He felt that he would need time to recover himself. He had been prepared for a great deal; he knew that his foster-father was not exactly scrupulous. But such an exhibition of utter meanness and baseness he had never anticipated.

That he could have fallen so low in so short a time seemed scarcely possible. He was hardly able to realise that one wrong step so inevitably leads to a second and a third and a fourth; that sin is, in its very essence, a dark and bottomless pit. Robert Morton was the most striking object-lesson he had yet seen, and he never wanted to see another.

And yet this man had prospered, not in spite of his wrong-doing, but because of it. His ill-gotten gains had increased and multiplied; the lower he stooped morally the higher he had risen socially. With the sacrifice of manhood there had been to all appearances a steady increase of gold.

Harry hurried away from the door as though the place were plague-stricken. He would have liked to have seen Madge and Dora, and that meek and faded

woman he had so long called mother, but he had not the courage to ask for them. He was not at all sure that they would care to see him. If the rust and taint of gold were upon them as upon the head of the house, the chances were that they would have no desire to renew the acquaintance, and he had been humiliated enough for one day.

He did not even look back as he hurried away from the house. He wanted to lose himself in the darkness and crowd until he was able to face the world again with less ruffled feelings.

He was nearing the end of the drive when he saw a slender girlish figure coming slowly toward him. A minute or two later they came face to face and their eyes met. They both paused suddenly, while a simultaneous exclamation burst from their lips.

“What, Harry?”

“What, Madge?”

“Oh, I am so delighted to see you. Where have you kept yourself all this long time?”

“And I am delighted to see you, Madge. I had almost despaired of finding you.”

“And you have been to the house?”

“Yes, I have been closeted with your father.”

“And have you not seen mother and Dora?”

“No, Madge, I have only seen your father.”

“And you are going away without seeing them?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Harry! Are you ashamed of us?”

“No, Madge, but I thought you might be ashamed of me.”

"How can you say so! You know I have always believed in you, and my only regret is that you are not my real brother."

"Ah, so your father has told you!"

"He told Lord Menheniot first, so of course everybody got to know."

"And you were sorry?"

"For my own sake, yes; but not for yours. Oh, Harry, I wish father had remained poor! I think he was a good man then, and I was proud of him; but now—oh, Harry, I do not know what to think!"

"He has not improved, certainly," Harry said, bluntly.

"He is an altogether different man. I hardly recognise him sometimes. I have a feeling as though my real father had been stolen away and another man put in his place. Oh, it is terrible. I cannot tell you what I feel."

"And do the others feel the same?"

"No, I don't think so. Mother has changed also. She likes to feel herself a fine lady. It makes me cry sometimes to see her. And as for Dora, poor Dora, I sometimes tremble for her."

"Why, what is the matter with Dora?"

"Oh, I cannot tell—nothing definite. She seems as happy as a bird all the day long, but she lives solely for pleasure. To be at parties, dances, dinners, "at homes," to go to theatres, balls, and such-like things is all her delight. And if anything should happen to father! If this sudden fortune should end as suddenly, as I sometimes fear it will, I do not know what would become of Dora."

"She had better be happy while she has the chance," Harry answered, gloomily.

"I do not object to that. But I have a dread of what this gay life may lead to. To her fine dresses and plenty of excitement are everything, and there is danger in that to a young girl."

"And you are not fond of fine dresses and plenty of excitement," he questioned, with a smile.

"Oh, of course, I like pretty things. What girl doesn't? But—but—oh, Harry, I was infinitely happier back in Graystone, when I had to earn my own dress money teaching music. I cannot explain things. But the life we are living here is false, unnatural, artificial. It is a make-believe and a sham."

"Why so, Madge? Your father seems to have made plenty of money."

"And the money has been a curse to all of us," she answered, vehemently. "Oh, come away from here! Let us walk out toward the Heath. I have so much I want to say to you."

"Perhaps your father will be angry if he discovers you have been with me," he said.

"I cannot help it if he is. I have got beyond troubling about such small matters. As far as I am personally concerned nothing can matter any more."

He turned abruptly and looked at her. "Why, what ails you, Madge?" he questioned.

"Everything, Harry, and yet I cannot die. If I could only die I would not mind. But I am young and healthy, and I am afraid I shall have to live on for years and years."

"And don't you want to live?"

"I did once, Harry, but I don't now. If I were certain I should die to-night, I should shout for sheer joy and thankfulness."

"But why? What makes you feel like that?"

"Because I am doomed to a living death."

"I do not understand you, Madge," he said, uneasily.

"Of course you don't, Harry, but I will explain myself directly. Let's get farther away from the house first," and she took his arm as she used to do in the old days, and they walked away together in the direction of the Spaniard's Road.

The twilight was deepening rapidly, and here and there a star—faint and pale—was beginning to show itself in the sky. They did not speak again until they got out on the ridge of the Heath. Below them London sweltered as in a furnace, and hid itself in a coppery haze, but out here the air was sweet and cool, coming from the green and wooded country that stretched northward in dim and spectral outline.

"I love to get out here," Madge said, at length. "I almost think I can see Graystone sometimes, when the weather is fine and clear."

"Have you left your heart at Graystone, Madge?" he asked, with a smile, not thinking of how much his words implied.

He felt her hand tremble for a moment on his arm, but it was getting too dark for him to see the blush that swept over her face.

"I never knew how much I loved the dear old

place until it was lost to me," she answered, after a pause.

He did not reply, for he loved Graystone also—loved it for Monica's sake; and for a moment the memory of all that he had hoped for and lost chilled him like a cold blast from the North.

"Nobody will recognise us here, or overhear us," Madge said, at length; "and I know I can trust you, and that I shall have your sympathy. Oh, it is good to see and be with you once more."

"It is good for me," he said, in an undertone.

"You do not know Sir George Hardwood?" she questioned, after a moment of silence.

He smiled, as he answered, "No, Madge, such big people do not come my way. But who is he when he is at home?"

"Oh, he is a great City man. Father is mixed up with him in some way. Only he is able to dictate terms to father, and I think he has helped him a good deal."

"What is he like?"

"You mean in appearance?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, he is short and stout and dark, with full eyes and a very bald head, and he always looks on good terms with himself."

"Then I have seen him."

"You have?"

"Yes. I saw him driving in Cheapside with your father. He looks one-third Jew and two-thirds beast."

"Hush, Harry. He is to be my husband."

"Heavens, no!"

"It is the solemn truth. Now do you wonder that I want to die?"

"Yes, I do; for you needn't marry him unless you like."

"Oh, don't say that, please. I held out as long as I could, but father says he will be ruined if I don't."

"He will be ruined if you do."

"How? What do you know?" and her fingers closed tightly round his arm.

"I know nothing about his dealings with this Sir George Hardwood. But I know that in the order of heaven the game that he has been playing for years is bound to end sooner or later in disaster."

"What game do you refer to?"

"The game of money-making. It began when he forged Lord Menheniot's signature."

"What?" she gasped, and she dropped his arm as though something had stung her.

"Who did you think forged that cheque?" he questioned. "Did you believe that I did it?"

"Oh, no, Harry; I was always certain that you were innocent."

"Then who else could have done it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I have thought that Lord Menheniot really put his name to the cheque, and after his illness forgot all about it. Sometimes I have wondered if his wife, who is so strange in her head, did it in one of her freaks. At other times I have thought of Rupert Grant; he was so jealous of you, you know."

"I am sorry to undeceive you, Madge, but you may as well know the truth now as later on—better it may be. Your father sacrificed me to screen

himself, and now he is going to sacrifice you, and he shall not do it if I can prevent it."

"It is not to screen himself, Harry. There is mother and Dora and Bob, and I must think of them."

"I understand the feeling, Madge. It has possessed me up to now. My comfort has been the thought that I was saving you."

"Oh, Harry!"

"It is the truth, Madge. For your father—though I believed at that time he was my father also—I did not trouble. But for you, Madge, and the others, but for you especially, I was willing to suffer. But you see it has been in vain. I have not saved you."

She clung to his arm again, but did not speak.

"This theory of the innocent atoning for the guilty may be all right as a theory," he went on, "but it don't work out, and it oughtn't to. You can never make a white out of two blacks, nor a right out of two wrongs. The innocent may suffer for the guilty, and they have to do it willy-nilly. I have suffered in your father's stead, but is anybody the better off? Is he? Am I? Are you? He has got more money, but how? If he had got it honestly he would not be afraid of this Sir George Hardwood. An honest man is never afraid of anybody."

"Then you think——"

"I am sure," he interrupted, "as sure as one can be of anything in this topsy-turvy world. But look here. I could not help suffering in the place of your father. He had so cunningly managed matters, that

no jury in the world would have returned any other verdict. In your case, you are left with a free choice."

"But think if ruin overtakes him and the others."

"It will overtake him sooner or later, and you cannot prevent it. And even if you could, would it be worth the price? What you call ruin might be the best thing for all concerned. You admitted just now that his money had brought a curse with it, and that you were far happier in your poverty at Graystone."

"I am sure we were all happier. Even father was."

"Then why try to prolong this miserable, false, artificial sham of a life that you spoke about just now? Suppose you marry this bald-headed baronet—what then? Your father may get a little longer lease of wrong-doing. Do you want that? Is that worth sacrificing yourself, body and soul, for?"

"But what can I do?" she moaned.

"Do? Go and marry that young parson at Graystone. You love him, and I know he loves you."

"Hush, Harry. Who told you that I loved him?"

"You did, Madge."

"I? How? When?"

"Just now, when your hand trembled on my arm. Do you think I am unable to put two and two together?"

She bent her eyes on the ground and was silent.

"Think of the miserable waste of my life, Madge," he went on, after a pause, "and take warning."

Her eyes filled in a moment, and she raised them appealingly to his.

"It is easy to talk of sacrifice," he continued, "but what is the good if nobody is benefited by it? Besides, in your case, it would be giving fresh opportunities for more evil to be wrought."

"But I have given my word," she cried out, suddenly.

"Then withdraw it," he said.

"But that would be wrong."

He turned upon her with an impatient gesture. "I really do not understand you women," he said. "You strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. You jib at breaking a promise that never ought to have been made, and yet give yourself body and soul to a man you loathe. Monica Stuart has done the same thing. I saw her the other day looking as miserable as the grave."

"Why did she do so?"

"Because she made a promise and had not the courage to go back on it, or else it was a choice of evils. I don't understand such things."

"And if I marry Sir George you will despise me?"

"I shall. But that will be nothing to the misery of despising yourself."

"Oh, Harry, you are terribly stern."

"No, Madge, but suffering has taught me many things, and I would save you if I could."

"If I had you near me always, I might be strong," she answered, after a long pause. "But, oh! father makes me obey him."

"Well, in any case, postpone the evil day as long as possible," he said.

"And will you come and see me again?"

"Yes, some day, Madge. But I don't know when."

"Are you very busy?"

"Busy?" and he laughed with apparent light-heartedness. "So busy that I don't know what to do next."

They were retracing their steps again toward Firdale.

"And you are really making your way, Harry? You must have found it very difficult. But you will succeed. Oh, I am sure you will."

"Yes, I shall succeed," he answered, slowly. "Not after the fashion of what the world calls success. But the storm toughens the fibre, Madge."

"I don't know; it seems to beat me to the ground and tear up every root."

"Have courage," he said; "I can preach it to you and to myself also."

"Oh, Harry, it has done me so much good to see you."

They had reached the gate of Firdale by this time. For a moment they stood grasping each other's hand.

"I am not hopeful, Harry," Madge said, at length, "but we shall meet again."

"Yes, Madge, we shall meet again."

So they parted. But neither knew nor guessed where or when or under what circumstances that meeting would be.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MONICA'S VISITOR.

MONICA rose to her feet and waited for her visitor to speak.

"I hope you will pardon me," the stranger said, pausing in the middle of the room and speaking very slowly; "you will think it very strange, I know, but I did not know who else to come to, and I am in great trouble, and—and——" Then her voice suddenly faltered, and her eyes became suffused with unshed tears. The sight of a fellow-mortal in trouble touched Monica's sympathies in a moment.

"Pray be seated," she said, kindly, "and don't distress yourself."

"My errand is such a strange one," the other answered, "and when you have heard what I have to say I do not know what you will think of me, yet I am compelled to come."

"Is it anything that concerns me in any way?" Monica asked, with a touch of curiosity in her voice.

"I don't know; I am only suspicious. Rupert says that it is all a mistake. Perhaps I am unduly apprehensive and jealous—it may be. You see I have only just recently returned from Malta, where my father held command of a detachment of infantry, and—and I saw the announcement in the paper on my return."

Monica wheeled round her chair, and drew herself closer to her visitor. "I do not think I understand you," she said; "what are you referring to?"

"Well, it is this way. I was engaged to be married," she answered, with a little blush—"that is more than three years ago before we went to Malta. Of course, we have kept up a correspondence ever since, and everything seemed to have gone smoothly, but when we returned a few weeks ago I saw the announcement in the paper. Of course it may be all a mistake, or there may be some one with the same name. Rupert says that it has no reference to him at all."

"What Rupert do you refer to?" questioned Monica.

"I mean the gentleman to whom I am engaged," was the reply; "his name is Rupert Grant."

"Oh, now I am beginning to understand," Monica answered, looking very white and trembling slightly.

"The newspaper report said that Mr. Rupert Grant was going to marry a Miss Monica Stuart, of Graystone Hall. My father did not see the announcement in the papers, and I have not mentioned it to him yet, but Rupert says it is all a mistake, and must refer to some other individual of the same name."

"But you do not trust your lover's word?" Monica questioned, with a curious smile playing round the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, yes, I think I trust him, indeed I do trust him, only, you know, one likes to be certain, and I felt that I could not resist the temptation to come

to Graystone and get at all the facts for myself. You are Miss Monica Stuart? "

" Yes," was the answer, " that is my name."

" And you are to be married shortly? "

" I am to be married in a week," Monica answered, slowly.

" And you are to marry a Mr. Rupert Grant? "

" That is so."

" Have you a photograph of him that I could see? Of course it is not the same Mr. Rupert Grant that I am engaged to," she went on in little gasps, " only you understand a woman's curiosity, and I should like to see his portrait if you have one by you."

" May I ask you," said Monica, with great deliberation, " what is the profession of the Mr. Grant to whom you are engaged? "

" Oh, he is a barrister," she answered, quickly.

" And what is his father? "

" I think he is a clergyman," was the reply, " but really he never said much about his people; he told me that he was not well off, and that he would have to earn his own income before he could marry."

" And that was three years ago? "

" Oh, yes, we have been engaged over four years now."

" And you expected, of course, when you came home that he would have made a position for himself? "

" Well, I had hoped so. At any rate, he has always written very hopefully about the future, and naturally I have looked forward to our return."

" And is your lover's home in this neighbourhood? " Monica questioned, curiously.

"Oh, no, I do not think so, but really I do not know. It was somewhere down in the country. He used to speak of his people as living right away in the country, fifty miles from everywhere, but I paid little heed to the matter, and so I really do not know in what part of the country his home is. I addressed all my letters to his club."

"Oh, I see," Monica answered, drily; "would you mind showing me a letter of his? I do not want to read it, but so that I may see the handwriting."

The stranger blushed and looked confused.

"One's love-letters are not for strangers' eyes," she answered; "but I will show you the envelope. Here is the last letter I received from him before my return."

Monica glanced at the address and the blood rushed in a torrent to her face.

"Miss Dorothy Fielding.

250, Strada Reale,

Valetta, Malta,"

the address ran, in the clear, bold handwriting of Rupert Grant; there could be no mistake about it. She would recognise his handwriting anywhere. For a moment or two she felt as though the room were spinning round upon a pivot, she lost sight of her visitor, a mist had come up before her eyes that blotted out everything. She quickly recovered herself, however, and looking straight at her companion said, "I am very sorry for you indeed, and I am very sorry for myself. We have both been deceived, terribly deceived, but in your case the deception has been more cruel than in mine."

"Do you mean," said her visitor, starting to her feet and looking with eager, beseeching eyes, "that the man you are engaged to is my affianced husband?"

Monica did not reply, but she rose at once, walked across to the piano and took a photograph from it, which she brought back and handed to her visitor.

"That," she said, "is the portrait of the man I was to marry next week."

The other glanced at it for a moment, and then sank back into the chair from which she had risen.

"It seems that we have both become engaged to the same man," Monica said, hardly and bitterly, "but you have the prior claim, if you care to enforce it." Then the frown upon her face grew into a smile; it seemed so utterly absurd that two young women should be claiming the same man.

Miss Fielding, however, was in a very different humour. Indeed, the emotions of the two girls were totally different. Monica felt angry and indignant; the other, on the contrary, appeared crushed and broken-hearted. She had given her heart to Rupert Grant when she was only in her teens, and had loved him with very sincere and passionate devotion; she had cherished his memory during all the time that she had been in Malta. Absence had only made her heart grow fonder. She had weaved a beautiful romance about his name, and had enveloped him with a halo created by her own love and fancy; and now to return and find that while he had been writing letters of love to her he had proposed to another—that actually the day of the marriage had been fixed, while only a few days previously in her

own home in London he had protested undying affection for her, and declared that the announcement in the newspapers was altogether a mistake, or that it referred to some other individual—to have her lover thus exposed as a cruel and heartless deceiver was a shock that for a moment took away all her strength and seemed to crush her to the earth.

Monica was quick to appreciate the situation, and her heart went out in sympathy to the stranger in a moment. Her own position, painful and humiliating as it was, was nothing in comparison with that of the other. She knew, of course, that when the comedy became public property, her position would be a very unpleasant one, but the position of Dorothy Fielding was a hundred times more trying. Monica had no heart trouble. There had been no outrage upon her affections. She had never cared for Rupert except as a friend; she had promised to marry him merely as a convenient family arrangement and as an escape from a somewhat unpleasant and difficult position.

But in the case of Dorothy, it was very evident that the girl had given him her whole heart, that she had dreamed of him during all the time of her absence, and that she had been building upon a happy marriage on her return. Hence she not only suffered from a sense of humiliation, but from a bitter sense of loss.

For a while she seemed too utterly crushed to speak another word, and as Monica looked at her she resolved that she would put aside her own humiliation and play the part of comforter.

"I am very sorry for you," she began again, "very sorry."

"Oh, don't," the other answered, with a sudden blaze in her eyes, "please don't. It comes with an ill grace to say you are sorry for me when in my absence you have stolen away my lover."

For a moment Monica flushed and bit her lip, but she was resolved not to be angry; she could, in a measure, understand the feelings of the other girl.

"I can assure you," she said, "that I had no desire to steal him away; had I known of his engagement to you I should not have listened to him for a moment. As it is I will resign him to you at once, and if you can win him back again do so by all means. Be assured I shall never marry him."

"But your wedding is fixed," the other answered, clenching her hands tightly.

"That makes no difference," was the reply, "I promised him under a misapprehension."

"But you love him; of course—love him as I do," the other replied.

"Do you love him very much?" Monica questioned, with a pathetic smile.

"I have loved him with all my heart until now," was the reply.

"And perhaps he loves you," Monica said; "I am sure he has never loved me. He was going to marry me for my money, for he is poor, and I was going to marry him—well, because my guardian wished it, and because I wanted to escape from an uncomfortable position."

"And do you mean to say that you have never really loved him?" Dorothy questioned.

"I have liked him, of course. He has been very kind to me; he is very handsome also, and a man that most girls would admire, but as for loving him—well, in the sense you mean, no. I have never loved him; I shall never love any one."

"But your not loving him cannot make my case any better," was the reply. "Oh, I trusted him so much; I had such confidence in his word; and now to be deceived seems to take everything away. It makes all the difference in the world. I feel as though I hated him, as though I could kill him."

"He has certainly been very cruel," Monica answered; "and yet, perhaps, there is something to be said in his favour. You see, he has expensive tastes, and has grown up with the idea that some day he will come into a large fortune. He wanted money, and had none of his own, and the temptation to marry me was therefore very great, don't you see. I presume that you are not very rich?"

"No, unfortunately, we are only poor; we have to live upon my father's pay, that is all."

"And he knew that, of course."

"Oh, yes, he knew all about us."

"Well, you must put yourself in his place, and think how he was tempted. Try to put the best construction upon his conduct you can."

"It is very kind of you," was the tearful reply, "but when one's faith has been shaken it cannot be restored again in a moment."

"Yes, that is true," Monica answered, "and for myself I know I shall never be able to trust him

again, but then I have never cared for him as you have done."

"But what can I do?" the other wailed, wiping her eyes.

"I think the best thing you can do just now is to stay where you are. I am expecting Rupert here in a few minutes. He will be surprised to see you, no doubt, but we will see him together and hear what he has to say."

"Oh, no," was the reply, "I don't want to see him now. I will go straight back home and try to forget him."

"No, you must not," Monica said, firmly; "now that you are here the whole question had better be sifted to the bottom. I am prepared to meet him by your side. We will stand before him together, we will hear from his own lips what he has to say."

"Oh, I don't know," the other replied, tremblingly, "that would be too terrible an ordeal just now. I want time to recover myself and think."

"There is no time like the present," Monica answered, drily; "always strike while the iron is hot, that is my motto."

"But what good would come of our seeing him together?" was the timid reply. "He would only be very angry and indignant, and might say rude things and do something very desperate."

"Let him say rude things if he likes, or do desperate things if he is so disposed. Something is due to us surely, and we have a right to see him together and to hear what explanation he has to offer."

"Oh, you are strong," the other replied, shrinkingly, "and your heart is not broken as mine is."

"Your heart can only break at the worst," Monica said, "and if your heart is broken the worst has happened."

"But he may accuse me of spying upon him and all that kind of thing."

"And has not the result justified your action?" said Monica. "You came here to inquire, it is true, but there were reasons why you should do so, and, unfortunately, all your worst fears have been realised."

"That is so, indeed," the other replied, applying her handkerchief to her eyes, "but please let me go back now; I do not want to stay any longer."

"But you must stay," Monica said, "and besides there is no escape for you, for I see Rupert just coming up to the door."

"Then let me hide somewhere," was the pleading answer; "I really cannot face him just now."

Monica glanced at her visitor suspiciously. "Has she been telling me the truth?" was the question that rushed through her mind, "or has she come here to make mischief?"

Her mind was now fully made up. She would probe this matter to the bottom. Perhaps she had been too hasty in judging Rupert. Perhaps this young woman was merely an adventuress. She had heard of such cases. How did she know that she was what she represented herself to be? She had given no evidence but her own bare word, and the address of a lady in Malta in Rupert's handwriting. This might not be Dorothy Fielding at all. The

whole story might be trumped up merely for the purpose of making mischief or, perhaps, of extorting blackmail.

"No, I will have no hiding," Monica said, sternly; "it is as much due to myself as to you that this matter should be cleared up."

"But I cannot see him now," the stranger pleaded.

"But you must and shall," was the reply. "You have come here with very definite and serious charges against the man I had promised to marry. But you will please understand I have only your bare word for them. Do you not see the position you have placed me in?"

The other shrank back in her chair with a sudden gasp that was almost a cry.

"Do you doubt my word?" she asked, with dilating eyes.

"For the moment I will doubt nothing and believe nothing," was the answer; "I have listened to your story; it is only fair I should hear what Rupert has to say in reply."

For one or two seconds the two women looked without flinching into each other's eyes; then the door-bell rang clearly through the house.

"That is Rupert," Monica said, in firm and decided tones; "now we will get to the bottom of this."

The stranger made no reply, but her breath came in quick, short gasps. Her hands were clasped tightly and nervously. She might be preparing herself for execution.

Monica watched her steadily. She hardly knew

whether to believe her or not. Her manner and her appearance were clearly in her favour; she did not look like an adventuress.

Monica's face was very pale, and her upper lip seemed to be drawn tightly across her teeth; her heart was beating at fever-heat. She felt as though she had reached the supreme crisis of her life. The truth or falsehood of this young woman's story meant everything to her. It opened up such an array of possibilities that she felt bewildered.

A few moments later a knock came to the door, and the servant announced Mr. Rupert Grant.

"Will you ask him to come in?" Monica said, in a voice that she scarcely recognised as her own.

The next moment the door was pushed open, and Rupert, bland and smiling, came into the room.



"DOROTHY," HE GASPED, "WHAT—WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

See p. 307.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FACE TO FACE.

MONICA'S visitor was deep in an easy-chair with her back toward the door, so that when Rupert advanced to greet his affianced wife he was unaware that there was any one else in the room.

"Monica, my darling, you look pale to-day," he said, in his most devoted manner.

At the sound of these words the stranger leaped from her chair as though she had been shot, and with flashing eyes stood up before him.

Rupert stepped back with a muttered exclamation, and for a moment his eyes looked as if they would start out of his head.

"Dorothy," he gasped, at length, "Dorothy, what—what is the meaning of this?"

"That is what I want to know," she said, proudly.

The timid, shrinking girl had vanished, and in her place was a strong, resolute woman. The sound of her lover's voice calling another woman "darling" stung her to sudden energy, and called into play the latent soldier that slumbered in her blood.

Rupert took another step back and seemed to shrink into himself before her blazing eyes. His slow brain could invent no excuse, could frame no explanation. He had been caught so completely off

his guard that he was utterly and absolutely helpless.

"So the newspaper report is true after all," she said, "notwithstanding all your protestations to the contrary?"

But he made no answer. He dropped his eyes to the floor and stood staring at the carpet.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?" she questioned, indignantly.

He raised his eyes with a sudden flash of energy. "You know all there is to be known," he said.

"And you have no excuse to make, no explanation to offer?" she questioned.

"What's the use?" he answered, defiantly. "You've caught me on the hop, and you're welcome to the triumph."

For a moment or two there was silence. Monica stood some distance away, leaning her elbow on the piano. She now interposed for the first time.

"What do you mean by triumph, Rupert?" she asked, with a little shake in her voice.

"I mean what I say," he answered, doggedly.

"I do not see much triumph in a woman discovering that her lover has played her false," was the answer.

"I've played nobody false but myself," he replied, sullenly. "I've been a fool, a—fool," and he retreated farther toward the door.

"Then you admit that you promised marriage to this young lady?"

"I admit nothing, and I deny nothing"; he answered in the same dogged tone.

"Oh, Rupert," Dorothy cried, reproachfully.

Monica turned toward her, then walked across the room and took her hand.

"I ask your pardon for doubting you just now. Now I will leave you with him. Good-bye," and without looking at Rupert she walked out of the room.

What passed between Rupert and Dorothy will, in all probability, never be told. All that is known to a certainty is that half an hour later they walked away from the house together, that he accompanied her to the railway station and saw her into the train, after which he returned to the vicarage.

Monica, from the window of her room upstairs, saw them walking down the drive together, and when they had turned the corner, and vanished from sight, she threw herself into a low basket chair and heaved a sigh—a sigh that might have been of relief or of pain or a mixture of both.

"So ends another chapter of my life," she said to herself. "I wonder what the next will be?"

After a while she tried to analyse her emotions, but she was not very successful in the attempt. Her feelings were so completely mixed that she was unable to sort them out and label them. She was happy and angry at the same time, thankful and chagrined, relieved, and humiliated.

It was a relief not to have to marry Rupert, and yet not getting married would mean remaining at Graystone, and the life of Graystone was becoming intolerable, and indeed just then life seemed intolerable from every point of view.

From a worldly point of view she had everything—wealth, youth, good looks, a beautiful home, un-

bounded freedom, and yet it seemed to her as though she had nothing. Life was without aim or purpose or ambition. Of the weary round of what society is pleased to call pleasure she knew little or nothing, and she had no desire to know. Life for her did not lie in that direction. For years she had been yearning for something and she knew not what. Her guardian had talked to her about having an aim in life, and she had fancied in a vague, indifferent way that in marrying Rupert she would realise this.

Now she was adrift again. Even the pleasurable excitement of ordering dresses and receiving presents, and looking forward to a jaunt on the Continent, had come to a sudden end, and for the next month she would be the object of a vulgar and gaping curiosity.

No, she was not as elated as she thought she ought to be. It was not pleasant to have her faith in Rupert Grant so suddenly and ruthlessly destroyed. It was not pleasant to have to look forward to the dreary round of doing nothing, such as had marked the past. It was not pleasant to contemplate dwelling in the same neighbourhood with a man she would dread to meet.

In truth, nothing was pleasant, and she heartily wished that she had never been born. Then her thoughts turned back to the old days when she and Harry Morton were boy and girl together. She was happy enough then, and the future was always a pleasant theme to dream about. How the reality had falsified all their dreams! Poor Harry was an outcast, while she, notwithstanding her pleasant surroundings, was perhaps as miserable as he.

At length she rose to her feet and went in search of her guardian. She found him busy in the library, busy with some letters which had just come in.

"Can you spare me a little of your time?" she asked, pushing open the door.

"Something important?" he questioned with a grave smile.

"Yes, very important."

He looked at her scrutinisingly. He saw that her face was very grave, and that her eyes had a look of pain in them.

"Sit down, my child," he said, kindly; "you look tired."

"I am tired," she said, "and worse."

"Ah, you have not heard any bad news, I hope."

"It may be bad news to you," she said; "the marriage is not to take place."

He wheeled suddenly round in his chair and stared at her.

"You are surely joking?" he said.

"I am in solemn earnest," was the reply.

"Oh, that is all nonsense," he said, gravely. "You cannot back out of this thing as though it were a matter of no consequence. Why, you are all but married."

"It is not a question of my backing out," she answered. "If there is any blame in the matter it does not lie with me."

"With whom then?"

"With Rupert."

"Do you mean to say he does not want to marry you?"

"It looks like it," she answered.

"But why?"

"Because he has found another woman he likes better."

"Oh, this is fooling," said the Earl, impatiently, "and very poor fooling at that."

"I can assure you it is nothing of the kind," she answered, firmly; "Rupert and I have parted company this afternoon for ever."

"Where is Rupert?"

"I presume by this time he is at the vicarage."

"And you mean to tell me that he is a consenting party to what will be nothing less than a public scandal? Everybody knows that the house has been taken and furnished and every preparation made for the wedding."

"If you doubt my word," she replied, stiffly, "ask Rupert."

"I will send for him this very minute," and he rose and rang the bell, while Monica opened the door and passed out of the room.

Half an hour later, Rupert came shamefacedly into the Earl's presence and took the chair lately occupied by Monica. He quite expected that Monica had told the Earl the entire story, and was prepared for a violent onslaught.

The Earl was writing when he came into the room and scarcely took any notice of him, but he laid down his pen at length and wheeled himself round in his chair.

"Monica tells me," he said, with forced calmness, "that you have broken off the engagement, and that the wedding is not to take place. Is that so?"

"Did she say that I had broken off the engagement?" he questioned.

"To the best of my belief, yes. She said that you had seen another woman that you liked better."

"Did she say anything else?"

"No, I think not. She intimated that if I wanted particulars I could get them from you."

"And she gave you no particulars whatever?"

"No, sir, she gave me none. I wish you would answer my questions instead of asking others."

"It's very good of Monica not to expose me," he reflected; then he answered aloud, "Pardon me, I was only anxious to know how little or how much she had told you."

"Then perhaps now you will be able to give me a direct answer to a direct question?"

"I hope so, sir."

"Is it true, then, that you have broken off the engagement?"

"Yes, but it is quite mutual."

"You are both parties to it?"

"Yes. We have discovered that we should never get on together."

"But have you discovered how you will get on without her?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Monica has wealth and you have nothing."

"But money is not everything, sir."

"Dear me, how wonderfully philosophic you have grown in a moment. But perhaps the other young lady has money."

"Monica alluded to an early fancy of mine. She has no money at all."

"Oh, I see," and then a silence fell. The Earl was very angry, but he kept himself well in hand.

"Look here, Rupert," he said at length, "this is a more serious matter for yourself than you are apt to think, and I would advise you to seek an interview with Monica and make it up again as soon as possible."

"I fear I cannot do that," was the reply.

"And why not?"

"Because we understand each other too thoroughly."

"Oh, that is all fudge. But hear what I have to say first. I have been wanting an opportunity to tell you for some weeks past, and you had better prepare yourself for a very unpleasant bit of news."

Rupert glanced up with a startled expression in his eyes. Was it true that troubles never come singly? Yet in his most despairing moments he never dreamed of such a revelation as that to which he listened.

The Earl told his story in much the same words as he had told it to Monica several weeks previously.

Rupert was too absolutely astonished to interrupt him. He listened like a man in a dream. It seemed as if the floor were sinking away from under him and he was dropping into empty space.

When the Earl had finished there fell a long and painful silence. Rupert's face was ashen, and every now and then he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"And you say you made the discovery three years

ago that your son was alive?" Rupert questioned, bringing out the words in gasps.

"It is nearly three years ago," the Earl answered.

"Then why did you not acknowledge him at once?"

"Because he was in prison at the time," and the Earl's face flushed.

"In prison?"

"That is so. Consequently, after much mental agony, I decided never to acknowledge him, but I have changed my mind."

"But why? Surely a gaol-bird is not fit to be heir to Graystone."

The Earl winced, and an angry flush swept over his face.

"I have every reason to believe," he said, "that he was wrongly convicted. I have been hunting up evidence ever since."

"And may I ask of what this son of yours was convicted?" Rupert asked, bitingly.

"Forgery," was the brief and abrupt reply.

"Forgery? Why—why—why——"

"Exactly," said the Earl dryly. "You interested yourself a good deal in the matter at the time, but you did not know that Harry Morton was my son."

"I am sorry for you," he said at length; "to have such a son must be a bitter grief to you."

"No, I am proud of him," the Earl said with a smile. "He nobly sacrificed himself to save another."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I'm suré of it, and I shall prove it yet."

"Then I wonder you do not have him at home."

"Alas! I have not been able to discover him. He was released from prison last year, since when he seems to have completely vanished."

"Very wise of him I should say," Rupert remarked, sarcastically, "and suppose he never shows himself again?"

"In that case it will be as though I had no son."

Rupert's brow cleared considerably.

"It will be to my father's and my advantage to see that this precious young man never does turn up again," he reflected. But he was careful to keep his thoughts to himself, and soon afterwards took his departure.

That night he lay awake till long after the light of a new day stole into the bedroom. He had long foreseen that he might miss Monica's fortune, and in some measure was prepared for the contingency, but the possibility—almost the certainty—of losing Graystone completely overwhelmed him.

"But it must not be," he kept repeating to himself, over and over again, "and by heaven it shall not be. No it shall not be," he added. After which he opened his heart and gave free admission to the devil.

Evil suggestions grow rapidly. Evil deeds spring from evil thoughts. Once give place to the devil, and you are no longer your own master.

Before Rupert fell asleep a desperate resolve had shaped itself in his mind, and when he awoke it was still there.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LOSING BATTLE.

For several days Rupert Grant fought a losing battle. He was not without conscience, and now and then, when he joined his father and mother at family prayer, he would resolve to put away the evil suggestions that had been lodged in his mind and fight the world with clean hands. But the evil suggestions came back again like birds to their nests.

A stronger man, or a man who had discovered the true source of all moral strength, would have conquered. But Rupert Grant made no profession of religion; he rather prided himself on being a man of the world. Religion was for clergymen and women. He considered himself superior to such weakness.

Moreover, as the days passed away, the gravity of his position made itself more and more manifest. He said nothing to his father of the Earl's communication. He treated it as strictly confidential. He had a reason for that. If the Earl chose to take his father into his confidence that, of course, was his concern. For several reasons, however, he hoped the Earl would say nothing further about the matter at present.

The first task Rupert had to undertake was to

inform his father that he and Monica had disagreed very seriously, and that the wedding had been indefinitely postponed; that done he began to make preparations for his departure to London.

The rector was greatly perturbed. He had built so much on Rupert's wedding. Indeed, Rupert had promised him repayment with interest of all he had advanced during the past five years. Now he might whistle for his money, and all the little plans and schemes that he had been cherishing during the past few weeks were scattered to the winds; and worse than all Rupert wanted a further advance of money.

"It is of no use my remaining any longer at Graystone," Rupert said; "I may as well get back to London and see if I cannot earn something."

"It's a great blow to me," his father replied.

"And to me also," was the answer. "I've wasted an awful lot of time and all to no purpose."

"But why were you such a fool as to disagree with her?"

"You should rather ask how I have managed to keep the peace with her as I have done. A woman is worse to handle than an eel; when you think you have got her fast you find she has slipped through your fingers."

"Not all, Rupert."

"Not all; some are like leeches—you can shed your skin sooner than you can get rid of them."

"You speak as though you had had a large experience, but you have not answered my question yet."

"Some questions do not admit of an answer, and yours is one of them."

"It was a chance in a lifetime," the rector grumbled.

"I know it, and I have missed it, so what's the use of worrying?"

"Because I am hard up, and you are always demanding money."

"Have patience. Rome was not built in a day. I'll pay you back in good time."

"You said that when first you went to London."

"I know it. I was a fool not to stay there, but the chance of marrying a fortune proved too tempting; besides, you egged me on and gave me no peace."

"Don't be rude, Rupert."

"It's only the sober truth. Besides, you should remember that this business is harder for me than it is for you. It's no light matter for a man of my age to be on the stream."

"And the Earl looks better and stronger than ever."

"Ay, he'll outlive you, and see me with grey hairs if not a bald head. So there's no help for it. I must go to London and work."

"I hope you will work. Your great sin hitherto has been idleness."

"Think so, dad? Well, we'll not discuss the matter. Everything, you know, depends on the point of view."

"Don't be flippant, Rupert. You are old enough now to look at life seriously."

"I never looked at it in any other way. I was born serious. Good heavens, there's been no chance for comedy in my case."

So within a week Rupert was back once more in London intent on two things. First, to negotiate a loan to meet his present wants, and second to arrange matters in such a way as to make good his future.

It was on this second point that he fought his battle and lost.

To make good his fortune one thing was absolutely necessary. Lord Menheniot must never find his son and heir, and to secure that end measures would have to be adopted that would not bear the light of day.

So far fortune was in his favour. The Earl's efforts hitherto to find Harry had been abortive. Nor was that all. By a stroke of good luck he believed that he knew where he could put his finger on the missing man.

If in this surmise he was correct, should he devise means for the purpose of removing him for ever from the scene of his earthly activities? It could be done he knew. Such things were being done constantly and never found out. Harry Morton was an unknown man, without a friend in London, living under a false name. If he were missed to-morrow nobody would trouble about it, no one would care. There would be one less in the great army of failures, one less for the State to care for, one mouth less to feed.

Should he do it, and so look forward with confidence to being Lord of Graystone? Graystone was a great deal to lose, but so was character and a good conscience.

There was bound to be a sacrifice somewhere.

Either he must sacrifice Graystone, or he must remove Harry out of the way. To be Earl Menheniot was a great thing—to have a seat in the House of Lords, to be lifted above pecuniary anxiety—all that amounted to a great deal, but the price he would have to pay was a very heavy one. Was he prepared to pay it?

At first he said No, and said it with considerable emphasis, but he grew very much less emphatic as time passed on. He was in dire straits. His troubles had come upon him like an avalanche. He had lost everything at one swoop.

To be told that he was not the heir to Graystone was bad enough, and sufficient to make a man consider any desperate remedy that might present itself; but coming upon his rejection by Monica, with the consequent loss of her fortune, was almost enough to turn his brain.

Nevertheless, he fought a half-hearted battle for several days. His life had not been altogether above reproach, though he flattered himself that he was not a whit worse than other young men of the same age and station. Still Society and the world at large drew a very clear distinction between vice and crime. The former it expected in young men—so he believed. At any rate it was tolerated and condoned. Judicious mammas closed their eyes and asked no questions. “Young men will be young men,” they said, “and after they have sown their wild oats they will settle down.” The only thing Society will not tolerate under this head is being found out. Be as vicious as you like, so long as it does not get into the law courts and become a public scandal. Society

will close one eye or both, just as occasion may demand, and be judiciously silent.

But crime is in a very different category. The world is very much less concerned about moral law than about civil law.

Rupert's vices had never lain a heavy weight upon his conscience. If Society could condone them he could condone them also. But he had never yet descended to crime, and when the suggestion first came to him to do so he almost gasped.

Crime was so low, so vulgar, so detested of all good society that the mere contemplation of it sent a cold shiver down his back. But what other escape was there for him? If he could not get Harry Morton out of the way he was socially a lost man. He knew very well that he would never be able to earn his own living. He hated work of every kind. He had scraped through his examinations and got called to the bar as a mere form. He never had the remotest intention of making his living at it. He was born a gentleman—on that fact he prided himself. Nature had intended him to be a full-bodied, ease-loving drone, not a working bee. Only common people worked, and there was nothing common about him.

But at present the fates were all against him. Now he cursed Monica for delaying the wedding so long, and now he cursed Dorothy Fielding for appearing at the wrong moment, and now he cursed himself for bungling the whole business.

But the loss of Monica and her fortune were as nothing compared to the loss of Graystone. That calamity overshadowed everything else. That the

Earl meant to acknowledge Harry he had not the least doubt. He had taken a long time to make up his mind, he had weighed well the consequences, and unless Harry was disposed of in some way his chance of ever being Earl of Menheniot was practically *nil*.

So day by day, as his position grew more and more desperate, the idea of removing Harry Morton out of the way lost its first horror, and he began to contemplate it seriously and with comparatively few twinges of conscience.

He lost no time on reaching London in instituting inquiries, and he soon found that his surmise had been correct. A month or two previously, in passing a large building that was in course of erection, he had seen a man carrying a hod who was the very image of Harry Morton. He had thought little about the matter at the time. It might be Harry Morton or it might not. It was not a matter that concerned him. He never supposed for a moment that Harry would cross his path again.

Now everything was changed. A single day had wrought a revolution. The very man whom he had supposed to be removed for ever out of the circle of his life was the one man who stood between him and fortune and honour and social position.

Day after day he went and stood over against the huge building that was being erected, and saw Harry climbing the ladders with a hod upon his shoulder. He felt sure it was he, and he looked a gentleman in spite of dust and grime and fustian clothes.

But to make assurance doubly sure he followed

him to his lodgings, saw him emerge an hour later in holiday attire, tracked him to the British Museum, saw him poring over a book, watched the play of his features until he had not the least shadow of a doubt that this was the very man that Lord Menheniot had been in search of for months past—the man who stood between him and an earldom.

“I’ve tracked my game, at any rate,” he muttered to himself, maliciously. “My next business will be to pot him; and the sooner the better, for if the Earl gets wind of him I’m lost.”

But discovering Harry’s whereabouts brought Rupert only to the beginning of his self-appointed task. What was to be the next step? He still had momentary twinges of conscience. He shrank from crime, especially such a crime as murder. Not that he would do the actual deed even if Harry were put out of existence, but he knew if he paid some one else to do it he would be just as guilty.

For a while he considered the question of getting Harry out of the country. But so many obstacles presented themselves that he had to dismiss the idea. Had he unlimited cash at his disposal something might be done in that direction. But a man of Harry’s type was not likely to leave the country unless some one could show him that it would be to his advantage to do so.

Moreover, even if he could be got out of the country, the end Rupert had in view would not be secured. The world was only small, and a man might be as easily found in Australia or Africa as in London, perhaps more so.

“No, no,” he said to himself, “If I’m ever to be

Earl Menheniot he will have to be put out of existence by some process or other."

But what the process was to be he could not determine. In olden time it might be easy enough to get a man kidnapped and made away with. But telegraphs and telephones and railways and electric light, and all the machinery that the law had brought into existence, had made the task one of infinite difficulty, if not an absolute impossibility.

He grew desperate as he contemplated the formidable nature of his task, and at times was half disposed to banish the subject from his mind and take his chance—face the inevitable and make an honest effort to earn his own living.

Then the thought of Harry Morton—the man he hated of all men!—being Lord of Graystone would sting him to madness.

How cruel fate had been—how the tables had been turned upon him—how he had sneered at Harry Morton in the old days as being a low-born clown—how he had hunted him down when the forged cheque had been discovered; how he had resented his intimacy with Monica and triumphed in his downfall.

Now, though he did not know it, Harry had all the cards in his own hand; without putting forth any effort fortune and position were tumbling into his lap.

"Oh, I hate him," Rupert would hiss, with clenched hands and a baleful light in his eyes. "I hate him. I have always hated him, and I shall never be happy until he is safe under the turf."

It is said that the devil is always considerate of the man who is bent on mischief, and sends a legion

of his angels to help him. Perhaps for this reason Rupert Grant, who was by no means clever, hit upon a plan at length for the safe removal of Harry Morton.

He had noticed, while watching Harry at his work, that one of his fellow hod-bearers was a low-browed, small-eyed scoundrel of the most villainous type, a regular gaol-bird in appearance, a man, who, unless his looks belied him, would stop at nothing.

"That is the man for me," Rupert reflected. "That man would sell his soul—if he has a soul, which isn't at all likely—for a pot of beer. He has cunning, too, and determination. I must get hold of him, if possible, and sound him as to his capabilities."

Rupert watched his opportunity for several days. It came at length. The low-browed ruffian turned back one evening for something he had left behind. Rupert waited until he appeared again outside the wooden fence.

There was nobody about. All the other men, Harry among them, had hurried away in the direction of their homes as fast as they could. The street was quite empty.

With a shrug of the shoulders and a little shudder Rupert stepped boldly forth and confronted him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DANGEROUS GAME.

THE small-eyed ruffian closed one of his tiny orbs and stared at Rupert with the other. He was not in the least abashed, and manifested not an atom of surprise.

"You've been working on this job some considerable time, I think," Rupert stammered, uneasily.

"I hev', guv'nor, if that's any satisfaction for yer to know."

"It may be a satisfaction, or it may not, it all depends. I am interested in one of your mates."

The small-eyed man opened both his eyes and waited for further information.

"The young man," Rupert went on, "with the dark moustache and curly hair cropped short."

"You mean the Markis."

"Very likely I do. He carries a hod and often climbs the ladder directly in front of you."

"Exactly, guv'nor, 'e belongs to the quality, 'e do, but we calls 'im the Markis."

"And what is your name?" Rupert asked.

"My nime, guv'nor," with a leer; "well, my nime is not much known to the quality. My nime is Blokes. Edward Blokes. Likewise Ned."

"Well, Mr. Blokes, it is possible that you and I

may be of service to each other. I suppose you do not object to something to drink? ”

“Well, usually I don’t say no when I hev’ the chance.”

“Perhaps you know of some quiet and respectable place where we can have a little talk together? ”

Blokes grinned, and closed one of his small eyes. “I twig,” he said. “You follow me, guv’nor. I know the very spot,” and he turned and walked rapidly away, followed by Rupert at a respectful distance.

“I think I’ve found the right man,” Rupert reflected, as he threaded his way through a maze of narrow streets and alleys. He was careful, however, to notice the way he took. It was an unsavoury neighbourhood, and he was most anxious not to fall into the pit that he was digging for another.

Blokes paused at length, and waited for Rupert to get near him. Then he pushed open a narrow door and entered, closely followed by his companion.

It was a small, badly-lighted room in which they found themselves—evidently the back of a shop of some kind.

“We cannot get a drink here?” Rupert questioned.

“You trust that to me, guv’nor,” the other replied, and he gave three raps on a round table that stood in the middle of the room.

A minute later a decrepit old woman entered and received Blokes’s order in silence. When she had retreated Blokes drew up two chairs to the table and sat down on one himself. Rupert followed his example.

"You are quite sure we are free from observation here?" he questioned, uneasily.

"You mean, guv'nor, that nobody'll 'ear what we s'ys to each other?"

"That's just what I do mean."

"Then mike yer mind easy on that score, guv'nor; I knows what I'm abart."

Rupert glanced about him uneasily. He felt that he was completely at the mercy of this low-browed ruffian, who, if appearance counted for anything, would not scruple to murder him for a mug of beer. It would never do to show fear, however. His company was of his own choosing, and he would have now to see the matter through.

Meanwhile the old woman had returned with two mugs of beer, a small loaf of bread, and some cheese.

"'Ere's to yer 'ealth, guv'nor," Blokes said, closing an eye, and he took a mighty gulp of the beer, after which he proceeded to attack the bread and cheese with more deliberation.

Rupert, however, did not follow suit. "I'm neither hungry nor thirsty, thanks," he said, apologetically, "and besides, there is only enough here for one."

"There's more to be 'ad," Blokes answered, with his mouth full of bread and cheese; "but as you will, guv'nor."

"I can talk while you are eating," he said; and he drew up his chair and leaned over the small table.

"I'm all ears," the other said, and he took another gulp of beer.

Rupert fidgeted for some moments, scarcely

knowing how to begin. At length he made a plunge.

"You will understand that I am acting as agent for some well-known people. By profession I am a lawyer. This young man whom you call the Marquis stands in the way of some very important interests. Do you follow me?"

"Go ahead, guv'nor. I'm a following you as straight as a tow-line."

"Very good. It is necessary that he should not be in a position to turn up at inconvenient times, or make himself disagreeable. Do you understand?"

"I twigs, guv'nor; go ahead."

"It is not necessary that I should say much more at this point. The question is whether you are willing to act in the case."

"A very proper question," Blokes answered, clearing his mouth. "But you will excuse me, guv'nor, miking the remawk that you hev gone abart the business in a very clumsy wye."

"How so?" Rupert asked, flushing hotly.

"In this wye, guv'nor. You should hev awsertined if I were willing to act before mentioning nimes. Do you not see that I could give the tip to the Markis to-morrow, an' spoil your gime at once?"

"If I were dealing with some men I should have done so," Rupert answered; "but I felt sure directly I saw you that I should be safe with you."

Blokes grinned, but it was not by any means a pleasant grin.

"In course, you will mike it worth my while keeping the secret from the Markis?" he questioned.

"Of course I shall," Rupert answered, feeling very angry and chagrined. He realised that he had bungled frightfully, and tied himself to this man in any case. "And now about the other matter; can you carry out what I have suggested?"

"If you mike it worth my while, guv'nor, I'll consider detiles," and he leaned forward and whispered a sum.

Rupert started. "That is impossible," he said; "the whole matter under dispute would not run to it."

"Then nime yer 'ighest, guv'nor."

Rupert named a sum.

Blokes rose suddenly from his chair as if he intended to imply that the interview was at an end.

Rupert rose, also feeling very perturbed and ill at ease.

"I shall be at liberty to mention this matter to the Markis in the morning, of course?" Blokes questioned, with a villainous leer in his small grey eyes.

Rupert grew hot all over. "Mr. Blokes," he said, hastily, "I took you to be a gentleman, and I have treated you as such. You surely will not blab?"

Blokes laughed. "This is a matter of bizzness," he said; "I did not arsk yer to nime yer secret to me; an' you cannot very well arsk me as a gen'leman to bear the burden of it without p'ying me for it."

"The secret is the least part of it," said Rupert, trying his best to keep cool. "Sit down, Blokes, and let's be friends, and see if we cannot come to terms."

Blokes was inclined to be conciliatory. He was clever enough to see that the transaction would not end with the day; affairs of this kind laid the principal—unless he was more than usually clever—under a perpetual obligation.

So after a considerable amount of talk, terms were agreed upon. The earnest of which Blokes carefully stowed away in a dirty leather purse, which he explained he always carried with him.

When it came, however, to the working out of the scheme, further difficulties arose. Blokes appeared to be troubled by a sudden accession of conscience. Anything in the shape of murder he shrank from.

Rupert brought all his forensic skill to bear upon him.

"It is not to be murder at all," he said; "it is to be a pure accident. The scaffolding where you are working is enormously high, and, as any one can see, is very badly protected. A false step, a faulty plank, a rotten stave in the ladder, an unexpected jostle at the right moment, and the thing is done."

"Guv'nor, it's mighty easy to talk," Blokes answered, "but actin' mikes more demands on a man's talent."

"But you have the talent, Blokes," Rupert insinuated, with his blandest smile.

"It mye be so, or it mye not be, guv'nor, that is a detile we will not discuss now. First of all I hev to consider my own sifety, then yours."

"Exactly," Rupert answered, quickly. "There must be no bungling."

"Then we will meet again two nights from now."

"Where?" Rupert questioned.

"In this 'ere room. We're quite sife," and he got up and opened the door for Rupert to pass out.

Rupert drew a long breath of relief when he got into the open air, and hurried away as fast as he could into a more frequented neighbourhood. Once or twice he paused and turned round, fancying that some one was following him. It was an uncomfortable suspicion to get into his mind, for he was most anxious to keep his identity an absolute secret from Blokes and his associates.

On reaching a 'bus route he felt more at his ease ; it seemed easy to lose himself in the crowd, to climb to the top of a bus while it was still in motion presented no obstacles to a young and active man. Here he lit a cigar to steady his nerves, and then gave himself up to the consideration of the one problem that he had set himself to solve, how to succeed Earl Menheniot as Lord of Graystone.

During the next two days he spent most of his time in negotiating further loans. This done he felt that he would be able to live comfortably in London for a few months at any rate, and in that time much might happen to his advantage. He dressed himself in an entirely different suit of clothes for his second interview with Mr. Edward Blokes. He found the place of meeting without difficulty. Blokes was waiting for him.

The door was opened and closed with scarcely a sound. The small room was quite empty. Rupert felt much more at his ease than on the first occasion. In thinking the matter over he had come to the conclusion that he had scarcely compromised himself at all. Blokes did not know who he was or

what he was, or where he lived ; and even should he be disposed to tell all he knew, what harm could come of it? Harry might be put on his guard, but the chances were he would take no notice of the matter.

Rupert, however, was reckoning without his host. Walls have ears, and in the present case they had eyes also. Rupert had been tracked to his lodgings in Bloomsbury and his real name ascertained.

Blokes was in a very cheerful frame of mind. For two days he had been considering all the pros and cons of the case, and had come to the conclusion that the thing could be done and done safely.

The *modus operandi* he was not prepared to divulge, but he would need a further instalment of cash before he would go a step further in the case.

Rupert grumbled considerably at the amount ; moreover, he did not like the principle of paying for work before it was done.

Blokes was obdurate ; unless he was paid a large percentage in advance he would wash his hands of the whole affair.

"But I may go on paying you in advance and nothing come of it," Rupert said.

"Yer need not mike yerself uneasy on thet score," Blokes protested ; "plenty will come of it liter on."

"But when?"

"To-morrow. Yer sty 'ere till it's dawk, then we goes together to the plice, I will show yer a few things. To-morrow awfternoon yer come rand in a cawsual wye, like."

Rupert shivered, and for some minutes was silent. Soon after it was dark, Rupert and his companion

walked away together. They had no difficulty in getting through the fence that surrounded the new building. But for what purpose Blokes had brought him, he could not understand. He saw nothing, and did nothing, except climb two ladders and listen to a whispered talk by his companion that he could make neither head nor tail of.

Outside the fence they parted, taking opposite directions. But Rupert had not gone many steps when he came face to face with two men, one of whom flashed full upon him the light of a bull's-eye lantern.

The glare almost blinded him for a moment, and he started back and raised his hand suddenly to his eyes.

Nothing was said to him, however, and after a momentary pause the two men passed on. Nevertheless, the incident left an uneasy impression on his mind. Was he being watched? Were his steps being dogged? He half resolved not to go near the place on the following day, and yet how should he know that Harry had received his quietus unless he were near the spot at the time? He was bound to risk something if he were to gain his ends; it was a part of the price he would have to pay.

He slept very little that night, and such sleep as he had was disturbed by unpleasant dreams. He felt that he had entered upon a dangerous path, that he had suffered loss, that he had parted with the best part of himself. Character might not count with the world. Reputation was the main thing. Character might not have any money value or social value. But the loss of it meant a good deal to

the loser. He had an uneasy consciousness that strength had gone from him. He felt discredited in his own eyes. The world might never know, yet he felt that he was paying too big a price even for an Earldom. It was, however, too late to turn back now. He had set the stone rolling far up the hillside. He could not stop it if he would. He must wait till it reached the bottom. He almost hoped that it would not kill Harry on the way, much as he hated him and desired his removal. With the dawn of a new day all his worst feelings took possession of him again. He saw himself hopelessly stranded unless Harry were removed. Moreover, no time was to be lost over it. He knew that Lord Menheniot was instituting inquiries in all directions for his lost heir. Hence if he was to strike at all, he must strike quickly.

The forenoon passed very slowly away. He was impatient for the fatal hour to arrive. It was nearly four o'clock when he strolled slowly toward the new building. The street was busy—as it usually was at that hour of the day. Suddenly a quick movement seemed to seize every one. A rush was made for the wooden fence. Cabbies pulled up their vehicles and stood upon the seat. 'Bus drivers copied their example. A hurried whisper ran from lip to lip. "Scaffold accident—man killed dead on the spot."

CHAPTER XXX.

AS A MAN SOWS.

RUPERT's heart gave a sudden bound, and then seemed for a moment to stand still. A minute later he was hurrying forward with the crowd toward the scene of the accident, but it was no easy matter to thread his way amongst five hundred others, who were as eager to get within the enclosure as himself.

Every one knows how quickly a crowd gathers in London. People came running from all directions, out of courts and alleys and side streets, as the news of the accident spread. Old and young, men and women, rushed eagerly forward to know the truth of what had happened.

Rupert saw that his chance of seeing the body of the man was but a small one unless he could gain assistance from some one in authority. Fortunately for him he came up with a policeman, and, placing a half-crown in his hand, and whispering to him that he had reason to believe that the man who had fallen from the scaffold was a client of his, he soon had a way made through the crowd, and in a few minutes was standing by the side of the prostrate form. A handkerchief had already been laid over the man's face, but this was lifted off at Rupert's request, and he saw, to his horror and to his satis-

faction, that the man was no other than Harry Morton. The face was cut and bruised and bleeding, but it was the face of the man he hated, and who had stood between him and rank and wealth and position.

"You think he is dead?" he said, turning to the policeman, and to some others who seemed to be in authority.

"There's no doubt about it," was the reply; "no man could fall from such a height and be alive."

"I find he is not my client after all," Rupert said to the policeman who had conducted him to the spot, and, thanking him, turned away and was soon swallowed up in the surging crowd.

He was in a very exultant mood when at length he found himself in one of the busier thoroughfares on the top of an omnibus. The day was fine, the sun shining brightly overhead, the street was alive with people, the scene was exhilarating in its movement and colour. But Rupert's one thought was that he had accomplished his aim, and accomplished it in such a way that suspicion could not possibly attach itself to him. There was no pity in his heart that a young life had been so ruthlessly destroyed, and for the moment even his conscience did not trouble him; everything was swallowed up in the exultant feeling that the one obstacle that stood between him and wealth and position had been removed, and in due course he was bound to come into possession of a title and an estate.

So exultant did he feel that he resolved on a specially good dinner in honour of the event. Making his way to the Holborn Restaurant he sat

down to enjoy himself while a band discoursed sweet music, and wealth and fashion thronged the halls of that huge establishment. It was late when he reached his lodgings in Bloomsbury, and great was his surprise when, on pushing open his sitting-room door, he found a stranger sitting in semi-darkness in an easy-chair near the window. Rupert gave a start and an exclamation. The stranger did not rise, however, and manifested no concern. Speaking quite calmly, he said, "You seem surprised, guv'nor, to see me in this plice, but I thought I'd just come and congratulate yer, and at the same time speak just a word of warning."

"What, you!" said Rupert, in astonishment. "How did you find out where I lived?"

"Oh, that's a mere detile," the other said, insolently.

"Then you have been shadowing me?" questioned Rupert, in a tone of indignation.

"And what if I hev?" the other asked.

"What if you have?" thundered Rupert; "I object to any one following me about and watching my movements."

"I reckon your objecting can't mike any difference," was the reply. "If I chooses to find out where the gent as emplies me lives, that is my business and I have a right to do so."

"You've no right to do anything of the sort," was the reply; "you have no business to come to this house."

"Don't be so mighty touchy," said the other patronisingly; "you said as you and I was to be friends. I've helped yer to carry out yer little gime,

and yer don't suppose that I'm goin' to let yer escape without pyment, do yer?"

"You need not have followed me here; you would have found me as good as my word."

"But I wanted to warn yer," was the reply; "two men saw yer last evenin', and folks are on the look out for yer. You see, it's been discovered that the accident was owing to something or somebody as put dinger in the wye of the young man."

"Well, what of that? I did not put danger in his path."

"P'raps not, guv'nor, but you were seen in the show last night; you were seen coming art of the plice; two men would know yer fice again if they were to see yer, and I've come to tell yer not to be seen in thet neighbourhood agine for the present, at any rite."

Rupert grew hot and cold by turns.

"You scoundrel," he said, "now I see why you induced me to go to the place last night; it was simply a ruse of yours to get me into your power."

"Well, guv'nor, I've got yer into my power. I want yer to mike no mistike on that point."

"You think you have," said Rupert, with an uneasy laugh, "but do you imagine I am such a silly bird as to be caught with such chaff?"

"Well, guv'nor, try yer 'and at esciping, and you'll soon find out whether you are in my power or no."

"Who said I wanted to escape?" Rupert asked.

"I didn't say you did, but the likes of you might

want to do. You might go awy out of the town to-morrow, and I might whistle for my money if I hadn't just a little hold upon yer."

"I shall go where I like and you cannot hinder me," was the reply.

"I wants to put no obstacle in the wye of yer movements," the other answered with an impertinent grin; "all I wants you to understand is: that when I wishes to renew the acquaintance you don't turn up your nose and pertend that yer don't know me."

"And suppose I do pretend that I don't know you?"

"Well, you had better not try it on; but before we part to-night you had better hand me over the balance of what yer promised me."

"And if I do that, I presume you will never molest me again?"

"Well, guv'nor, I shouldn't like to cut old friendship short in such an abrupt wye."

"And do you mean that you intend to dog my steps and levy blackmail whenever you feel disposed to do so?"

"Oh, nothing of the kind, guv'nor; I only wants to keep yer friendship. You're a gentleman of my own liking, and I don't want to lose sight of yer, that's all."

"Oh, very well," said Rupert, adopting a conciliatory tone; "let us part good friends, and if you ever recognise me in the future be kind enough to do it when no one else is about."

"Ah, now, guv'nor, you talk like a gentleman," was the reply; "you must not suppose that I will

stand in the wye of yer advauncement, or of my own."

"I should hope not, indeed; you ought to know on which side your bread is buttered."

"Well, guv'nor, I thinks I does."

"I am not sure that you do; still, the little business that you entered upon has been carried through successfully. I presume the fellow has shown no sign of coming to life again?" Rupert questioned.

The other laughed harshly. "No fear of that, guv'nor; he's as dead as a coffin nail."

"That is satisfactory; now let us square accounts, for I am tired and want to get off to bed."

A few minutes later Rupert saw his visitor into the street and bolted the door behind him; then, with a sigh of relief, he took his candle and made his way upstairs to his own bedroom. But, though he tried hard to court sleep, sleep would not come. He felt as though he had been weaving a rope for his own execution. He had flattered himself that Blokes did not know who he was, or what he was or where he lived. He had discovered evidently where he lived, and for all he knew he might have discovered the other things; and he saw, not without a shudder, that this man might track him even to the day of his death. The next day he shifted his lodgings to another part of the city, and for several days he went about unmolested. He kept as far away as possible from the scene of the accident, and avoided all places where he thought it likely Blokes might be.

But Blokes was evidently a man of resource, for Rupert had not been in his new lodgings a fortnight when he was greatly surprised on receiving another

visit from his acquaintance. Blokes, dressed in holiday attire and evidently on good terms with himself, swaggered into his room, and drawing a small handbill from his pocket passed it on to Rupert and waited the result.

Rupert read it with cheeks that grew paler and paler every moment until he stood before his tormentor with a face like a corpse.

"Why did you bring me this?" he asked at length.

"Just to show yer that there's dinger in yer path," was the reply.

"But I have no intention of going into that neighbourhood again," he answered, and he read the handbill a second time. It was headed "Police Notice," and went on to state that a reward of ten pounds would be given for information that would lead to the discovery of the culprit who had tampered with the scaffolding at a certain building whereby a serious accident had happened the day before. It further stated that after dark on the previous evening a man dressed like a gentleman was seen lurking behind the wooden hoarding, evidently for no good purpose; that two watchmen employed on the adjoining premises saw him come through a small opening in the hoarding and flashed their lights upon him, and were quite certain that they would be able to recognise him again if they saw him. The bill further stated that the gentleman, whoever he was, evidently intended foul play, and that the above reward would be given to any one who would give such information as would lead to his discovery.

"It seems, gov'nor, that they're miking it warm

for yer," said Blokes, insinuatingly, when Rupert lifted his head the second time.

"Making it warm for me, you scoundrel!" he said; "they're making it warm for you."

"Oh, nothing of the kind," was the reply; "you see I was not seen loitering abart the plice."

"Well, what of that?" was the answer.

"Well, you see, the mischief is you were seen in the plice after dawk, and the cucumstaunces in course looks suspicious."

"Well?"

"Well, I've brought yer information, and it ought to be worth something."

"You mean that you expect me to pay you more money."

"Well, guv'nor, if you like to put it in that pline wye, of course I don't object."

"Then let me tell you once for all that you will not have another penny from me."

"I'm sorry to 'ear yer sye that," was the answer, "for you see I shall be under the pineful necessity of getting the ten pound that is offered in this 'ere notice."

"What do you mean?" was the angry retort.

"I jüst means what I sye. Here is ten pounds offered for the discovery of the gentleman as was seen aloiterin' abawt the premises after dawk. You were seen. The men as saw yer outside can swear to yer if they are brought fice to fice with yer."

"I confess I don't see what you are driving at," Rupert said, growing very hot.

"I thought, guv'nor, that I'd spoken pline enough. I told you in the other plice that you were in my

power; now you understand, I think, that you are. I don't ask for ten pounds; I will be more generous. Two pounds will just put me on. I'm 'ard up at present, and I'm sure you can't compline of my demand."

"I do complain very much. I gave you all we bargained for. Between man and man I have acted fairly. For you to come and blackmail me in this way is intolerable."

"Well, you see, I'm 'ard up at present, and as an old friend I am sure you will 'elp me out."

Rupert protested and swore and argued and grew angry, but in the end he gave the money, and Blokes went away with a smile upon his sinister face. When he had gone Rupert dropped into his easy-chair and tried to think. It was very evident that, while he remained in London, he was shadowed everywhere. This man, doubtless, was one of a gang. He had his confederates, who shared his money and who kept watch over his (Rupert's) movements.

"This will never do," he reflected; "I must put an end to it somehow, but how?" Then he pulled out his watch and looked at it. "I'm too late for the last train," he said, "so I may as well content myself to remain here another night, but to-morrow I had better get back to Graystone, and make as good an excuse to my father as I can. It's horribly humiliating, but it is evident that London is not just the place for me at present."

The next day, much to the surprise of his father and mother, he turned up again at the rectory. He

explained that he was not feeling at all well, that he was quite certain that he was in for an attack of influenza, and so well did he feign illness that he remained in bed a whole week without exciting any suspicion. Indeed, he looked ill, and was feverish and restless. His mother was quite concerned about him, and wanted to call in a doctor, but he would not hear of that.

"I'll be all right in a few days," he said, "but this kind of thing takes it out of a man."

For another week he kept in the house, and for several days after that never went beyond the rectory grounds. Now and then he looked across at the Hall, but made no attempt to go there. Within a month of his return he had recovered his usual strength and spirits; he was able to sleep again without being disturbed by painful and distressing dreams. All fear of encountering Blokes passed away from his mind; he felt certain that at last he had destroyed the scent. In the country he was safe from molestation.

His surprise, therefore, was all the greater when one afternoon, walking across the fields in the direction of Minver, he came face to face with none other than the dreaded Blokes.

"What, you here?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Well, guv'nor, I thought I would just come along and inquire after yer 'ealth. I discovered that yer left London not at all well, and as a friend I thought I would come and inquire."

"You are very kind indeed," said Rupert, cynically. "I can assure you I do not need so much

attention," but though he spoke calmly he was in a state of greater excitement than he had been for many a long day. It really seemed to him that there was no escape from the penalty of his wrongdoing. Blokes discovered him wherever he might be, followed him wherever he went, and demanded money at every possible opportunity.

Moreover, he had not the courage to resist him. He did not know how much the man knew. That he knew a great deal was only too evident, that he was in the ruffian's power he was only too fully convinced, but whether he would resort to extremes in case he refused to be further blackmailed he did not know.

To put the matter into the hands of the police might reveal a great deal that he wished to keep secret, and yet to be shadowed and blackmailed was intolerable.

"Yer do not seem pleased, guv'nor, to see an old friend," Blokes said, with a wicked leer in his small grey eyes.

"Come, stop your fooling," Rupert said, impatiently; "let me know how much it is that you want this time, and then take yourself off as quickly as possible."

"Well, as I have come a considerable distance," said Blokes, unabashed, "sye double the amount you gave last time."

Rupert pulled his purse out of his pocket and emptied its contents into the fellow's hand.

"There," he said, bitterly, "it is all I have. I can't give you what I don't possess."

"P'raps yer relitions will come to yer 'elp afore

I see yer agine," Blokes said with a bland smile, and quietly took his departure.

Rupert went home and shut himself up in his room, and two hours later his mother found him feverish and unstrung, and insisted on sending for the doctor.

But it is not within the province of the medical profession to minister to diseases of the mind. Rupert was discovering how great was the price he had to pay; and the last of the toll had not been exacted yet.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SORTING THINGS OUT.

MONICA meanwhile had taken the law into her own hands. Rightly or wrongly, she had come to the conclusion that she was not wanted at Graystone, that she was in the way, that she was a drag on her guardian's movements, that she imposed a burden upon him that he would be glad to be without, and that he would be much happier if he were relieved from further responsibility.

She was fully convinced in her own mind that Lord Menheniot's son, wherever and whenever he might be found, would prove to be a clown, whose presence at the Hall would change the entire character of the place, and make life for her practically intolerable.

Furthermore, the proximity of the rectory to the Hall would be a source of constant irritation. She would of necessity be continually thrown into the way of Rupert Grant, and after what had happened anything more unpleasant she could not imagine.

And, last of all, she was now of age, was her own mistress, and was utterly weary of doing nothing. Up to the present she had had no aim in life, nor purpose. Fettered by custom and precedent, she had just stumbled along in the only way that seemed

open to her—doing what she was told to do, and yet inwardly rebelling all the while.

The morning after her interview with Dorothy Fielding she awoke as from a painful dream. The confusion of the previous evening had completely passed away from her mind, the mist had been lifted from her eyes, and she saw almost for the first time life as it might be and as it ought to be.

She was no longer in doubt as to whether she was sorry or glad. It was as though a heavy load had been rolled from her heart. All the considerations that had oppressed her the night before seemed as nothing in comparison with the glad sense of freedom that had come to her. She might be the talk of the county, the subject of endless gossip, the object of a prurient and vulgar curiosity. But what of that? She need not show herself unless she liked. She need not remain in Graystone unless she wished.

And she gave a little gasp as this thought flitted through her brain. She had never thought of acting independently, of fighting her own way in the world. She was only a girl to be watched over and cared for, and to follow where others lead.

But—and a strange light came into her eyes with the new thought—she was a woman now. Why should she be always in leading strings? Why should she not go her own way? Do something for herself and for others? She had lived selfishly up to the present. Cooped up in a narrow little world, where she had scarcely room to breathe, what was there to hinder her in the future living a larger life? She had money—more than she needed—might she not do some good with it?

She had sent a donation now and then to this organisation and that, and there her good work had ceased. She had read now and then of what others had done to lighten the burden and brighten the life of the poor and suffering and outcast, but she had taken no real part in it.

There was a settlement somewhere in London that she had often felt curious to see, where help was rendered, not by paid officials, but by men and women who gave of their time and strength and money, asking for no reward but the joy of doing good.

She got up at length, and drew aside the curtains and looked out over the smiling landscape. She was never tired of its beauty. It was always restful, too, and year by year its peace remained untouched and undisturbed. But to-day the very quiet seemed to make her restless.

"I can do nothing here," she said to herself; "I cannot write books in this seclusion that will stir people's hearts to nobler things. I cannot paint pictures that shall kindle in men a greater love of beauty. I am not clever; I am only an ordinary commonplace girl. But, surely, though I am neither a poet nor an artist, I may do good some other way. I have hands to work, I have a voice to sing, I have money that I may use to some worthy purpose."

Then she fell on her knees by her bedside, and thanked God that she had been saved from a fate that she saw clearly enough now would have been a living death to her. And while she prayed, the impulse to go out into the world and do some-

thing for others seemed to be strengthened a hundredfold.

Later in the day she took her guardian into her confidence, and, to her surprise, he raised no strong or definite objection. He smiled at her in his cynical way and said she would tire of playing the lady-bountiful in a week.

"Then you don't object to my going and having a look at the work?" she questioned.

"Well, no," he said, hesitatingly; "you need a change of some kind after what has happened."

"Change is of no use," she said, "unless it gives one some interest in life."

"Well, Monica, you are beyond my control now," he said, seriously; "but let me urge you not to do anything rash."

She walked up to his chair and stooped and kissed him on the forehead.

"You've been very good to me, Guardy," she said, "and I shall never repay you for all your kindness. But it's time I got out of the old ruts. Besides——" then she hesitated.

"Besides what?" he questioned.

"Perhaps you will be finding and bringing home your son soon, so I had better be out of the way."

He smiled sadly for a moment, and wondered whether or no he should tell her that his son was her old playfellow and companion, but after a moment's hesitation he decided he would not.

"I have heard nothing of him yet," he answered; "I sometimes fear I shall never find him."

"In which case Rupert will still be heir of Graystone after his father?"

“Yes.”

“I hardly know which I the more sympathise with,” she said, after a pause.

He looked up at her curiously, but did not speak, and a moment later she left the room, and went and wrote a letter to the principal of the settlement in which she had become suddenly interested; after which she donned her hat and went off into the village to post it.

A little beyond the park gates she passed what had been for so many years the schoolmaster’s house.

She never looked at it without thinking of Harry, and to-day Harry had been in her thoughts more than ever. She felt that she was free to think of him now if she liked. She was wronging no one else by doing so. How was he faring in his struggle with the world? and a wistful and far-away look came into her eyes.

Then the cottage door was thrown open and the young minister came out into the garden. He raised his hat to her and smiled.

She paused as he came toward the gate. “Are you going into the village?” she asked.

“I am, Miss Monica,” he replied.

“So am I, so we may as well walk together.”

He felt the compliment and smiled. She was an Earl’s ward and a lady of high degree, but had she been simply a farmer’s daughter she could not have been more at home with all classes.

“I hear that your predecessors have become quite big people,” she said, after they had gone a few yards.

"I am afraid they have," he answered, with a smile.

"Afraid they have, Mr. Everett?"

"Yes. The worst thing that can happen to some people is to grow rich rapidly."

"Have you seen any of the Mortons since they left?"

"I have seen Miss Madge once or twice," he answered, with a slight blush.

"And has she become the grand lady?"

"Oh, no. Indeed, I think she is very unhappy in her new surroundings."

"Why?"

"That I cannot tell you. I am only giving you my impression."

"And did she speak of her brother?" The question came out abruptly, after a considerable pause. Then she added quickly, "Of course, we have learned since that he is not her brother, though it is natural to speak of him as such."

"He will always be as a brother to her, I am sure," he answered.

"She believes in him?"

"Absolutely. And so do I, Miss Monica, and I fancy most other people do who know him."

"I suppose you have never seen him since—since his release?"

"No, and I question if any one else has—I mean of his old acquaintances."

"Don't you think the Mortons have?"

"They had not, the last time I saw Miss Madge. No, he seems determined to hide himself from all who knew him."

"I do not wonder."

"No, but it is terribly hard on a young fellow of so much promise. But I hope a fresh inquiry will be granted and that he will yet be cleared."

"A fresh inquiry?" she asked, and she stopped suddenly in her walk; "what do you mean by that?"

"Have you not heard?" he questioned in surprise.

"I have heard nothing. What do you refer to?"

"I know nothing except what I have seen in *The Daily News*," he answered. "But as far as I can make out, an application has been made for a fresh inquiry on the ground that a quantity of new evidence has been forthcoming that was not available at the time of the trial."

"But that can be of no service to him now," she said. "He has served his full time in prison."

Ernest Everett smiled. "If he is proved to be innocent it will be of very great service to him," he said; "indeed, to have his good name restored to him will be worth everything."

"In that sense, of course," Monica answered, looking far away along the lane. "But I was thinking of the years he has suffered. Nothing can take the iron out of his soul."

"No, that is the most painful part of it, and it seems an awful farce to talk of the Queen's Pardon when a man has been wrongfully condemned, and when for years he has suffered innocently."

"I sincerely hope a free pardon will be granted," Monica said, speaking in a tone of indifference that she by no means felt. In fact, the bare suggestion

that Harry's good name might yet be restored to him had set her heart throbbing wildly.

During the rest of the way very little was said, and in the village they parted company. Monica was everywhere greeted with smiles and good wishes, for no one knew yet that the wedding was not to take place. It was not until the following day that a whisper ran through the village that the wedding had been postponed.

A week later, Monica and the Earl travelled to London together, and then in some way or other the truth leaked out that the engagement had been broken off entirely.

Monica remained a month at the Settlement. But she was of too independent a nature to work permanently by rule or under a committee. She was constantly breaking out in fresh places. Her quick eye saw other things to be done that did not come within the scope of the organisation.

Her month of trial was a revelation to her. A revelation that stirred her sympathies to the very depths. She never knew before to what depths of poverty and want and despair people might sink. Never realised before what good people might do if they had only the heart and will to set about it. Never understood what thousands of children might be helped and saved if taken in hand at the right time.

At first she was appalled at the enormity of the work. The little she could do was as nothing in comparison with what wanted doing. When she had done her best she would be but as a bird pecking at a mountain. Indeed, she could do so little

that she asked herself whether it was worth her while doing anything at all. It is an old question, and most people find it a very convenient excuse.

When she had been a month in the East of London, she went to Bayswater and took possession of the house that had been furnished for her and Rupert.

"I want time to sort out things," she said to herself, "to find out if possible where I am to get an idea as to what I can do best, and what I can't do at all."

But this work of sorting out took longer than she expected, for she found that she had to organise her household at the same time. This proved a very interesting occupation, and set her thoughts running in new directions.

She had scarcely got her house in order when her guardian called.

"I did not know you were in town," she said, greeting him with effusion.

"I came up yesterday," he answered, "and having an hour to spare, I thought I would look you up."

"I should think so, indeed!" she replied. "And how are all the folks at Graystone?"

"Well; except, of course, Lady Menheniot—and Rupert, who, I am sorry to say, is back at the rectory on the sick-list."

"I am sorry."

"And so you have settled down to domestic life without a husband?"

"I have settled down to nothing yet. I am only feeling my way about, trying to sort out things and get my bearings."

The Earl laughed. "You find it a very interesting occupation, no doubt."

"So far, yes. You see, I am kept busy, and that is a great thing. Do you know the weeks seem as short now as the days used to do?"

"Is that an advantage?" he asked; "life will seem all the shorter."

"Oh, no," she replied, laughingly, "it will seem all the longer. There will be so much to remember."

"And are you really going to stay in London?"

"For the present at any rate. Of course, I shall come down to Graystone now and then when I want a change."

"But you will find housekeeping a great worry."

"I don't think so. Besides, you know, I have my old nurse with me as second in command, and she has been able to secure some excellent servants."

"Humph, it's early days yet to talk of that."

"Is it? Oh well, when I get tired of it I will give it up."

"But I thought," he laughed, "that you were going to live down Whitechapel way and practise philanthropy in a garret."

"I may do so yet," she answered; "did I not tell you I am busy sorting out things?"

"Oh yes, I have not forgotten that," he said, with a laugh; "but, judging by appearances, you have sorted out things pretty well, and, if I were asked to give an opinion, I should say that the garret idea was 'off.'"

"Well, perhaps it is for the present," she said, knitting her brows; "and do you know I am not

sure that, in order to help people who are down, it is necessary that you should go to live their life and play at being down yourself."

"Indeed!"

"Well, I am rather at sea on the point at present. Some of the sisters used to insist upon it that to help these wretched people you must live among them, spend your days and nights in their midst; and that they are doing a lot of good there is no denying. But——"

The Earl waited for her to continue with an amused smile upon his face.

"It seems to me like this, Guardy. If a man is down in a pit in the darkness and cold, stuck fast in the mud, you may help him by going down to him, and trying to lift him on your shoulder, as it were. Or you may help him by remaining up in the light and warmth, and lowering a bucket to him."

"And you prefer remaining up in the warmth, eh?"

"Well, yes, if by so doing I can do just as much good. I may be selfish, I expect I am, but just at present I do not see the use of playing the martyr merely for the sake of being a martyr."

"Sounds reasonable, that."

"I know you are laughing at me all the time, and think I am just a bit crazy. But if I can do a little good in the world, that seems about the only thing that is worth living for."

The Earl did not reply. Indeed, he was not at all certain that Monica had not grasped the true idea of life.

"Won't you stay to dinner?" she asked, when at length he rose to go.

"I cannot, thank you, Monica," he said; "I have an appointment with the Home Secretary at seven o'clock."

"With the Home Secretary?" she questioned, and instantly her conversation with Ernest Everett weeks before flashed through her mind.

"Shall I tell her?" was the question that he debated for a moment, and again he decided in the negative.

Before they saw each other again a good many things had happened.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

A WEEK or two later, when walking in Oxford Street, Monica came face to face with Madge Morton. She recognised her in a moment, though more than three years had passed since their last meeting. Madge looked just as young and just as winsome as in the old days, when she used to go singing across the fields to give music lessons to the farmers' daughters of Graystone.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," Monica said, in her bright cheery way, when their first greetings were over; "and do you know I think you are just the one who can help me."

"Help you?" Madge said, lifting her sweet brown eyes in surprise.

"Why, of course. You know I live in London now, and have heaps of schemes on hand."

"No, I did not know," Madge said, wondering that any one who was not driven by circumstances could leave the sweet air and restful beauty of Graystone for the grime and smoke and roar of crowded London.

"I have a house in Bayswater," Monica went on, "and I am experimenting on—but I am afraid it is too long a story. Are you busy this afternoon?"

"Not at all. I have come down here more to kill time than anything else."

"Then come home with me, and we can have a long talk, and I will tell you all about my schemes. You don't mind riding on the top of a penny 'bus, I hope."

"On the contrary, I enjoy it."

"So do I. I never get into a hansom unless I am in a hurry. Of course, on a 'bus one cannot pick one's company, but that doesn't matter, no one knows me here."

A few minutes later they were rolling toward the Marble Arch side by side on a garden chair.

"I think this is just lovely," Monica said, with a laugh. "For pure enjoyment I don't think there is anything in London equal to it."

"I agree with you," said Madge; "I have been all over London this way."

"Ah, then you are ahead of me; I am only just beginning to appreciate it."

Half-an-hour later they were closeted in Monica's drawing-room. Madge's brown eyes wandered round the apartment with evident admiration.

"Do you like it?" Monica asked, following the direction of Madge's eyes.

"I think it is lovely."

"I was to have come here as a bride, you know; but there was a fortunate slip betwixt cup and lip."

"I am afraid I do not understand," Madge said.

"Have you not heard?"

"I have heard nothing."

"Oh, well, as it has become public property I may as well tell you all about it," and she did.

"Are you not sorry?" Madge questioned at length.

"Sorry! I am infinitely glad."

"But why did you promise to marry him?"

"Ah, Madge, why do women make such promises?"

"They cannot help themselves sometimes, of course; they are forced into it. But you——"

"No, please do not add another word," Monica said, with a laugh. "I was forced into it somehow. I don't know how. There was no big push, but a lot of little ones, and I hadn't the strength or the courage to resist them. Besides, it seemed the only thing for me. I got an idea that it was my fate, so I drifted, and the current got stronger all the time, and there was no one to save me. It seems like an awful nightmare to me now."

Madge breathed hard and wondered if deliverance would come to her. She would have liked to take Monica into her confidence, but that would mean exposing the rottenness of her father's financial position, and she dared not do that.

The conversation drifted away at length to Monica's philanthropic schemes. Among the rest, she was going to send some cripple children down to Graystone for a month's holiday.

"To Graystone?" Madge questioned, and her eyes grew bright in a moment. Graystone!—the very name was music in her ears.

"Yes, I only decided on that yesterday. I got a letter from Mr. Everett. Do you know him?"

"You mean the minister of Bethel?" Madge questioned, with averted eyes.

"Yes. Well, he enters heart and soul into the scheme. I will show you his letter directly. You see I could not write to the rector. Then Mr. Everett is young and energetic. He says he can easily board out fifty children for a month, in clean, roomy cottages, and the people will be delighted to add a little in this way to their incomes."

"How good of you," said Madge, earnestly.

"No, don't say that, please. I'm awfully afraid I'm doing it just because it interests me, and I like it. But it entails a lot of work, and will entail more, and so you see I want some one to help me."

"I shall be delighted to assist you, if I may. I really want something to pass the time away."

Afternoon tea was brought, and Monica grew eloquent in unfolding her plans—plans, be it said, that were only in a state of nebulousity at present, but which were, nevertheless, fraught with far-reaching possibilities.

And yet, while Monica talked of so many things, all the while there was one question that was constantly on her lips, one subject that was uppermost in her thoughts.

Madge rose to go at length, and then it came to the surface.

"Have you seen or heard from Harry lately?"

Madge sat down again, and clasped her hands.

"No," she said, with a little gasp; "I feel very much troubled about him."

"For what reason?"

"For the very reason that he never breaks the silence. He only discovered where we lived early in

June, and he promised me faithfully then that he would come to see me again."

"And he has never done so?"

"No, he has not even written. Sometimes I think he must be ill or that some accident has happened to him."

"And did he not leave you his address?"

"No, and I stupidly did not think of asking him for it. I keep looking for him whenever I go into the City, and every day I hope that I shall hear from him or see him."

"It seems strange that he does not communicate with you," Monica said, reflectively. "Did he seem in good spirits when he came to see you?"

"Yes, on the whole, I think," Madge said, hesitatingly. "Of course, he was very much upset. I don't think father had received him very kindly, and then he heard for the first time the secret of his parentage."

"I hope he is succeeding," Monica said, after a long pause. "It must be a very hard struggle for him."

"He told me he was very busy," Madge answered, "though he did not tell me what he was doing."

After that day Madge and Monica often met, and a week later they travelled down to Graystone with the first batch of Monica's *protégés*.

To Madge it seemed almost like a dream. The time was early September, the weather was perfect, the country looking its best. There was no sign of autumn yet save in the shortening days. The trees stood up in their richest green, the hedgerows and gardens were full of flowers, and

over all was the glamour of the sunshine glorifying everything.

As the train sped on through the beautiful country Madge was too excited to talk. She was going back to Graystone—sweet, secluded Graystone—the most beautiful place on earth, and that thought crowded out every other.

She felt a little strange when the train pulled up at the station; the place seemed smaller than in the old days. Even the hills and trees seemed to have shrunk.

Ernest Everett was at the station to meet them, an eager, wondering light in his eyes. But he had no time to give to Madge then. The poor children required all his attention.

By noon all the little waifs were safely housed in their temporary homes, and then Monica, Madge, and the young minister walked away together in the direction of Graystone Park.

Monica had promised her guardian to spend one night at the Hall. Moreover, she was anxious to have a second look at her *protégés* after they had spent a night in their new homes before she returned to London. Madge was a little undecided what to do. But when Earl Menheniot added his entreaty to Monica's she consented to spend the night at the Hall with her friend.

Now it so happened that after lunch Monica had many things to talk over with her guardian, and repaired to his study for that purpose, and Madge, being thus left to her own devices, strolled out on the lawn and from thence into the park.

She said to herself that it was much pleasanter

out of doors than in, which was quite true ; also that she had not such beautiful grounds to wander in every day of her life, which was also true ; also that she wanted to feast her eyes on the surrounding country, which she had never ceased to dream about and long for since she went away.

So, letting herself out of the great house, where she felt very much less strange than she expected, she went forth into the soft September sunshine. How silent the world seemed, how restful the hills and fields ! What would she not give to come back to dear old Graystone to spend the rest of her days !

When a few minutes after she saw Ernest Everett coming toward her she did not seem in the least surprised, and when he grasped her hand so tightly that he hurt her fingers, she was not in the least put out, and then they wandered away under the trees together.

“ Isn’t it lovely here ? ” she said at length to her companion.

“ But a little quiet,” he added.

“ Oh, I love the quiet ; I hate the noisy strife of London.”

“ But you would not like to come back here to live again ? ”

“ Would not like it ? The place seems like heaven to me.”

“ I think you would find it very dull after the life you are leading now.”

“ Ah,” she said, with a pathetic smile, “ we all walk in a vain show and disquiet ourselves in vain.”

Then for a while they walked on in silence till they found a rustic seat that was large enough for

two. A dove was cooing in the tree above them, but that was the only sound that broke the delicious stillness.

"I wondered if I should have a chance of seeing you alone," Ernest began. "I have long wanted to have a talk with you."

She glanced up at him inquiringly, and then her eyes fell.

"I may be very presumptuous," he went on, "but I cannot help telling you that I love you, and that I have loved you ever since I came to Graystone."

She made a movement as if to silence him, but she could not somehow. It was so sweet to be told that she was loved by the man she cared more for than for any one else in the world.

"I know I have nothing to offer," he went on, "in the shape of worldly goods. For a Nonconformist minister in Graystone there is only poverty. But——"

"Oh, please do not say another word," she said, chokingly, and her eyes filled to the brim with tears.

"Do you resent my speaking?" he said. "Have I offended you?"

"Oh, no, no. You have honoured me too much, but you have spoken too late."

"Too late, Madge? Too late? Surely——"

"Yes, too late," and the pent-up tears welled over and rolled down her cheeks. "If you had said this to me sooner things might have been different. I do not know. But not now; not now."

"Then you do care for me a little?" he questioned, eagerly.

"Please do not ask me," she pleaded; "and yet

you have a right to know. I could have cared for you once very much, but that day is over and gone."

"What, have you grown to despise me? Oh, Madge, what have I done?"

"No, no, you have done nothing. I honour you very much. I shall always do so. But you must not speak to me of love."

"Why not?" he questioned, earnestly. "Surely a man has a right to tell a woman that he loves her."

"But she may not have the right to listen," was the quick reply. "I have no right to listen to you."

"But why?" he demanded, trying in vain to take her hand.

"I cannot tell you now," she said, lifting her brimming eyes to his. "Some day, perhaps, you shall know."

"But is there no hope for me?" he pleaded.

"I am afraid there is no hope for either of us. Now let us say good-bye here and try to forget."

But Ernest Everett refused to say good-bye. With all a lover's passionate eloquence he pleaded his cause, and wrung from Madge's lips the confession that she loved him still, but beyond that she could not go.

"No, it can never be," she said again and again, and when they returned from their ramble they walked silently and with downcast eyes.

Madge's heart was in a strange tumult during the rest of the day. She hardly knew which predominated in her afternoon's experience—the sweet or the bitter. It was terribly painful to have to say "no"

to the young minister's appeal, but it was infinitely sweet to be told with passionate entreaty that he loved her with all the love of his heart.

Madge did not see Ernest Everett again during that visit. She looked out for him the next day, but he kept very persistently out of sight. He had evidently taken her word as final.

She looked at all the windows of the house as she and Monica drove past on their way to the station, but he did not show his face. How she longed to go in and wander through all the rooms again and once more dream over the old days, but it was not to be.

Monica was looking toward the rectory where she was told Rupert lay quite ill, having had a relapse.

It was nearly dark when Madge reached Firdale, where she found the entire household in a state of the utmost consternation. Her father was missing. He had gone out, ostensibly to business, the previous forenoon and had not returned. They had waited up for him the whole of the previous night, and as soon as it was daylight messengers had been sent in search of him in all directions, but up to the present every inquiry had been in vain.

Madge listened without speaking a word. She knew more about her father's affairs than any one else in the house. She was to be offered as a sacrifice to save him from ruin. Had the ruin come in time, she wondered, to save the sacrifice, or were the others to be sacrificed as well as herself?

Her father was astute—cunning, perhaps, would be the proper word—also he was utterly selfish and unscrupulous. It was a grief to make these admis-

sions even to herself, but the truth had to be faced. The old Robert Morton, such as she remembered him in Graystone, was dead. The present Robert Morton was devoid of principle.

What, therefore, might his going away mean to those who were left?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE END OF THE TETHER.

IN a few days the air was full of rumours of the reputed doings of Robert Morton, who had so suddenly disappeared from the scene of his activities. Warrants were issued for his arrest on five or six distinct counts, and in City circles there was talk of forgeries on a colossal scale.

Scarcely an hour passed but there was some fresh development of the case. A perfect network of fraud was unearthed. The offices of Fletcher and Morton were besieged by an angry crowd of men and women who clamoured for the missing financier, and who threatened to wreak their vengeance on the innocent clerks unless their demands were satisfied.

People from remote country villages came hurrying up to London with panic-stricken faces, only to discover that they had invested their money in companies that had no existence except on paper. Some of the scenes that were witnessed were almost heart-breaking. In dozens of cases the entire savings of a lifetime had been swallowed up.

What Morton had done with the money no one knew save a few who were in the inner circle, and who had bled their victim for all he was worth. There were rumours of hush-money, tales of blackmail, hints of the doings of aristocratic blacklegs,

who flattered Morton with pleasant words, promised him introductions into the highest circles, and borrowed uncounted thousands of him without security and without interest. But such rumours brought no consolation to the honest folk who had been swindled out of all their savings.

And yet the fraud might have gone on for years longer, and Robert Morton might have continued to flourish like the bay tree, but for one circumstance.

A fresh inquiry, as we have already intimated, had been instituted into what was known as the Graystone Forgery Case, and the first day's evidence, which happened to catch Robert Morton's eyes as he was turning the pages of his *Times*, convinced him that he had played his game and lost, and without waiting for a further development of the inquiry he hurried off into the City, gathered together all the cash he could possibly lay hands on, and disappeared.

By the end of the second day it was as clear as a sunbeam to the learned judges that Harry Morton—or more correctly Harry Blunt, for such his name had been proved to be—was absolutely innocent of the crime for which he had been condemned, while so strong was the presumption that his uncle was the real culprit that a warrant was issued for Robert Morton's arrest forthwith. The emissaries of the law, however, on reaching Firdale discovered that the bird had flown, and as he had had a good thirty hours' start of them the issue of the case was to say the least doubtful.

Madge had not been in the house more than a quarter of an hour when the police arrived in the execution of their mission. Poor Mrs. Morton wept

and protested, and at first refused to let them come into the house. But she was soon convinced that no good could come of any such opposition, and after one or two more or less feeble protests she sank into a chair and threatened to faint.

Dora went a stage further and gave way to violent hysterics. It was not that she was so devoted to her father. But she was passionately fond of the gay life she was leading. Her father's sudden riches had opened what to her were the gates of Paradise. She revelled in receptions and "At Homes," and dances and theatres, and all the gay and empty round of pleasure. And the thought of being turned adrift again on the sterile wastes of poverty was as the bitterness of death to her. Whether her father was innocent or guilty was a question she did not consider. Everything was swallowed up and lost in the fear that her brief day of pleasure was at an end.

Madge alone kept her head. In a certain sense she was prepared for the catastrophe. She had seen it coming ever since her conversation with Harry months previously. The conviction had been forced upon her that her father was a hypocrite and a rogue. It was a bitter lesson for a child to learn; and yet because he was her father she would have screened him to the last, would have sacrificed herself if thereby she might save him from the penalty of his sin. But it seemed as if it was not to be. The juggernaut of justice and judgment would not be satisfied until it had overtaken the real culprit. It might crush to death a hundred innocent people on

the way, but it would not stop until the guilty party lay under its wheels.

Madge faced the catastrophe with a strange feeling of stoicism in her heart. For the moment it seemed to her as if it did not matter what happened. Turn in whatsoever direction she might there was the same blank outlook. It is true she might escape the misery and shame of marrying Sir George Hardwood, but instead she would have to go forth into the world bearing the shame of her father; go forth to poverty, perhaps to want, shunned by all respectable people because of her father's sin.

Woman-like she carried this view of the case to its farthest extreme. She fancied that even Ernest Everett would despise her when he discovered what a criminal her father was, and that if he ever smiled upon her again it would be in pity, and not in love.

The distress of her mother and Dora, however, left her little time to think of her own misery. For their sakes she felt she must be brave, if not for her own.

The police soon satisfied themselves that Robert Morton was not in hiding anywhere about the place, and after apologising for any trouble they had caused quietly took their departure.

"And what are we to do now?" Dora said in gasps, staring first at her mother and then at Madge.

"I'm sure I don't know," Mrs. Morton answered, tearfully. "I suppose we must wait till your father turns up again."

"Then we may wait till doomsday, for he knows a trick worth two of that."

"Hush, Dora, how dare you say such a thing!"

"How dare I? Do you think he would clear out without a very good reason? Father isn't a fool, whatever else he may be."

"Dora, I won't listen to such words," her mother said, angrily.

"Very good. You can play the ostrich, and bury your head in the sand, if you like," Dora answered, defiantly.

"I think we had better go to bed and get what rest and sleep we can," Madge interposed at this point.

"I think you are right," Dora answered, drying her eyes; "the chances are that to-morrow night we shall not have a bed to sleep on."

"How silly you are, Dora," her mother answered, pettishly. "If your father has run away he must have left heaps of money behind him, for he was as rich as Crusoë."

"I suppose you mean Crœsus?" Dora said, bitingly.

"I said what I mean, so don't be impertinent," Mrs. Morton answered with energy.

"Oh, please don't let us quarrel," Madge pleaded, the tears gathering suddenly in her eyes. "We shall need all our strength and all our patience in the days to come."

"Oh, you'll be all right," Dora answered, bitterly. "As Lady Hardwood you'll be able to snap your fingers at everybody."

"I shall never be Lady Hardwood," Madge answered, coldly.

"Never?" her mother cried, looking up.

"I suppose you think," Dora interposed, "that after this scandal Sir George will cry off."

"I don't care what he does," Madge answered. "When I promised to marry him it was to save father from ruin. As I am unable to do that the contract is at an end."

"I don't fancy he will think so," Dora answered, with a pout; "and, as for the scandal, that won't make any difference to him. The only difference between him and father is that he has not been found out."

"And do you think if I believed that I would marry him?" Madge asked, with flashing eyes.

"Why not? Nobody's honest nowadays if he has the chance of being anything else."

"Hush, Dora! You surely don't know what you are saying."

"Don't I? You should have heard them talking at Lady Dashgate's the other night. Everybody plays for his own hand in these times."

"If that's the kind of talk you hear at Lady Dashgate's, it's a pity you go there so often," Madge said, with rising colour.

"Oh, you are what Sir Geoffrey Dashgate would call a little Puritan, and he's right, too," and Dora walked out of the room.

Sir George Hardwood did not call for a full fortnight, and when he did so he assumed a very different air from his wont. He appeared to be as passionately in love with Madge as ever. But it was not love he talked at the outset, but business.

It had been a time of terrible strain to Madge. She never knew what any hour might bring forth.

Such news as appeared in the papers was often meaningless to her. The only thing that seemed clear was that her father was a bankrupt and a rogue. But whether anything could be gathered out of the wreck for the family no one seemed to know.

She was rather relieved than otherwise when Sir George put in an appearance at Firdale. He at least would be able to give some reliable information, for he knew more about her father's affairs than any one else.

When, therefore, he began to talk business Madge was only too glad to listen.

"I am dreadfully sorry for you," he said, wiping his bald head, "dreadfully sorry," and he dropped suddenly into an easy-chair. "I knew, of course, that your father was shaky financially, but——" and he began to wipe his head again without finishing the sentence.

"Will there be anything over when the creditors are paid?" Madge asked, timidly.

"Anything over?" and he gave a low laugh. "Well, no; I don't think there will be anything over."

Madge was quick to notice his tone, and the hot blood mounted to the roots of her hair.

"You mean that we shall be destitute?" she questioned.

"I did not say that," he answered. "From your father you will get nothing, it is true. But you have friends—friends who will not forsake you—friends who will be only too happy to see you surrounded by every comfort."

Madge looked at him inquiringly, but did not reply.

"Of course, as the old adage says, 'Circumstances alter cases,' " he went on. "It is very painful for you to see your father's name bandied about in the papers and all that—painful for you and for others. Of course you can't help it. You are not to blame, and yet the laws of what we call society are very strict. You don't hold just the same position that you did before."

"I quite understand," Madge answered, coldly, wondering what was coming next.

"Nevertheless, I will make it my supreme care to look well after you and yours. Your mother and Dora and Bob shall have everything they can reasonably desire, and if what has happened will not allow you to bear my name——"

But he never finished the sentence. Madge sprang to her feet white with passion and ran and threw open the door. "Be gone," she gasped; "leave this house at once."

He rose slowly to his feet and looked at her insolently.

"Oh, you need not put on airs," he said; "you cannot afford it."

"Will you leave this house this moment?" she almost screamed.

"Why should I? It is my house," he went on. "I hold you all between my finger and thumb. You fall in with my wishes or there's beggary for all of you."

"Beggary a thousand times or death," she cried; "but go this moment, or I'll have the police fetched."

He walked slowly past her out of the house, muttering curses as he went. On the following day bailiffs came and took possession of Firdale.

Madge and her mother looked at each other with despairing eyes. For them it seemed that the end of the world had come. Mrs. Morton had never been a woman of resource. She had trusted in her husband in every emergency of life, and now that she had no longer his arm to lean upon she felt utterly adrift and helpless.

"What can we do, Madge?" she cried, pitifully; "I have spent all the ready money I had, and—and——" and her voice ended in a sob.

"There's the workhouse for us when all else fails," Madge answered, with a touch of bitterness in her tone.

"You can go to the workhouse if you like," Dora answered, coming into the room at that moment and overhearing Madge's remark. "But I prefer something different," and with a toss of her pretty head she marched out of the room again.

"We can't stay here, that's certain," Mrs. Morton said, after a long pause, looking at Madge with dry eyes. "I had hoped Sir George would have done something for us."

"Never mention that man's name in my hearing again, mother," Madge answered, turning away her head to hide the angry blushes that swept over her face.

"Never mention—surely, Madge——"

"Hush, mother! Some day, perhaps, I may be able to bring myself to tell you, but not now."

"But—but——"

"No, as you love me drop the subject. He is a bad man; let that suffice for the present."

"But what is to become of us?"

"Heaven only knows. Perhaps I shall be able to teach music again, but anything will be better than the life we have been living here."

"Better, Madge, and in this beautiful house?"

"Have you enjoyed it? Oh, mother! For one bit of empty grandeur think of the price we have had to pay. We have lost everything worth possessing. Oh, if these last four years could be blotted out, and we could be as we used to be in dear old Graystone!"

Mrs. Morton sighed, and the look of trouble deepened in her eyes.

"I believe you think your father has done wrong," she said, at length, reproachfully. "But I shall never doubt him. He has been sinned against, and that's the cause of the trouble. Some day he'll come back and set all things right. Oh, your father is a very clever man!"

Madge looked at her mother, but did not reply. She only wished she had the same faith. Alas! she knew more than her mother did.

"If ignorance is bliss," she reflected, "I will not enlighten her. Better she should never know."

So in this way, with scraps of conversation now and then, they spent their last day at Firdale, and wondered what the morrow would bring them.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TIME AND CHANGE.

MONICA was so engrossed in her philanthropic schemes that she had no time to read the newspapers, and so knew nothing of what was happening in the home of the Mortons. She did wonder that Madge, after their journey to Graystone together, did not call to see her, but concluded that she had her own work to do, and that she would put in an appearance sooner or later.

Monica had settled the question as to her place of residence. Rightly or wrongly she had come to the conclusion that she could do just as much good living in Mayfair as in Whitechapel. She did not feel called upon to sacrifice all pleasant things because some people were doomed to live in poverty and squalor and others elected to do so. Because all could not afford large houses, and rich tapestries, and soft carpets, and rare pictures, she did not see why none should have them.

She did not profess to be a saint or a martyr. If the truth must be told, she wanted to be neither. But she did want to fill up her time in some useful way, and when once she entered upon her work she grew interested in it. She would say to herself sometimes that there was no virtue in the work she was doing, that she did it because she liked it. It

was her way of enjoying herself. Some women found pleasure in dressing themselves, and some in dressing dogs, and some in making calls, and some in dinner parties and theatres. She found pleasure in giving pleasure to others, in seeing the faces brighten of those whose life had been full of pain and sadness.

About this time Brynwild fell empty—her early home, the house in which her father had died. And as no fresh tenant was forthcoming at the time, she conceived the idea of turning it into a convalescent home for poor, hard-working people who needed a few weeks' fresh air after coming out of the hospitals.

She had seen how working men coming out of the wards had gone back to their labour all too soon, and how many a useful life had been needlessly shortened through lack of change and fresh air at the right time.

"It will do splendidly," she said to herself, with enthusiasm. "And I'm sure the place could not be put to better use." And she hurried off down into Bucks to put her plans into execution with the least possible delay.

"What I shall find most difficulty in getting," she reflected, as she journeyed homeward by train, "is a young and active housekeeper who will put her heart into the work and feel as interested as I do."

This question occupied her thoughts all the evening and far on into the night. She knew of no one that would just answer her purpose. Of course, she could advertise and would get doubtless hundreds of

applications. But she would rather not have an entire stranger if she could help it.

"I'll go and see Madge Morton in the morning," she said to herself at length. "She knows lots of people. I wonder why she hasn't called?"

And having settled to call at Firdale in the morning she quickly dropped off to sleep.

Madge had only just got downstairs when Monica called. She was pale and hollow-eyed, for she had scarcely slept for the night.

"Why, what is the matter with you?" Monica cried in astonishment; "you look quite ill."

"Matter?" said Madge, with a rush of tears to her eyes. "Oh, everything is the matter. Have you not heard?"

"I have heard nothing," Monica replied; "what is it?"

Madge dropped into a chair and in a few minutes had told everything.

For a while after silence fell between the two girls. In presence of such a calamity Monica felt dumb. She had no words of comfort for such grief as this.

"We must go from here to-day," Madge said, breaking the silence. "All the servants have gone. They refused to stay when they knew what had happened."

"But have you decided what you will do?" Monica asked.

"Not quite. It is so difficult to think and plan when everything is in confusion."

"But you have some idea, surely."

"Well, you know that in the old days I used to

give music lessons. Of course this is not Graystone, but down in Stroud Green we know a good many people, and——”

“I’m afraid you would find that very precarious,” Monica interrupted. “I think I have a much better idea.”

“Oh, I’ll be glad of anything in which I can earn a living honestly,” Madge said, eagerly.

“If I tell you why I have called this morning,” Monica said, with a smile, “you will see my idea at once.”

Madge listened with the keenest interest while Monica unfolded her philanthropic scheme and then broke down into crying.

“Oh, it would be just lovely,” she said; “and mother and Dora would find plenty to do also.”

“Yes, there would be plenty for all of you to do. Of course you would not necessarily have anything to do with the patients. There will be a proper staff of servants. The housekeeping itself will tax both you and your mother. Dora could look after the conservatory, as she is fond of flowers.”

“Oh, it is good of you,” Madge cried in ecstasy. “I never dreamed of anything half so beautiful.”

“I have given the order to Shoolbreds to furnish it throughout in very simple and homely fashion. It is not to be a hospital, but a home, you understand, and you shall have the little western wing all to yourselves.”

“Oh, it will be like heaven,” Madge cried; “and won’t mother and Dora be delighted!”

“Don’t tell them just yet; wait till I’m gone,

and that will save me the labour of explaining everything over again, don't you see?"

"As you wish. But I would like you to see how glad and thankful they will be."

"I'll imagine all that," Monica said, with a laugh. "Now when do you think you can be ready to go? You see some of the furniture was sent down yesterday, and I have only the old gardener and his wife there at present. I expect in a month everything will be in apple-pie order, and by Christmas I hope it will be full of guests."

"Oh, we can go to-day if necessary," Madge said, the colour coming back to her cheeks.

"I'm afraid you would find no place to lay your head in, if you did," Monica replied; "but you must come to my house for a couple of days, and by that time Shoolbreds will have rigged up something for you, and then you will be able to superintend the rest."

"Oh, you are good," Madge cried again.

"Then I shall see you in Bayswater this afternoon?"

"Yes, we will all be there," and when Monica had disappeared down the drive she ran upstairs in search of her mother and Dora.

Mrs. Morton listened to the news with every manifestation of thankfulness and delight. She had been sitting on the bed all the morning, crying and wringing her hands, and wondering if her misery would ever come to an end. And now when the cloud was lifted, and lifted in such an unexpected way, she felt as if she could scarcely contain herself.

"Let's go and tell Dora at once," she cried, and she rushed off to Dora's room followed by Madge.

But Dora's room was empty.

"I expect she is in the kitchen trying to get breakfast ready," Madge said, with a laugh.

"That's hardly like Dora," was the grave reply. Then her eye fell upon a letter on the dressing-table.

"Mother and Madge" were the words outside the envelope. Instantly Mrs. Morton tore it open and began to read, while a look of alarm came into her eyes and swept over her face.

"What is it, mother?" Madge asked, anxiously.

"Dora seems to have got a situation of some kind," Mrs. Morton answered, slowly. "I can't quite make it out. But read it for yourself."

Madge took the letter and began to read, and her face grew very white as she did so.

"Dear Mother and Madge" [the letter began],—"I did not tell you before starting, for I thought you might make a fuss and raise all kinds of objections. So I have left this note behind to explain things. I'm too fond of our present mode of living to go back to the old ways. I should simply die. You know I hate poverty and all that it means, and Sir George says there is no reason why I should be poor any more. I'm to be companion to a lady and have a very big salary, and we shall travel to all the gay places in Europe, and have no end of a good time. So don't worry about me. I'll write again after awhile. Yours affectionately,

DORA."

"Poor Dora," Madge sighed, as she laid down the letter, and her hands clenched involuntarily. She feared the worst, but she said nothing to her mother.

A few minutes later she questioned the bailiffs who were walking in the garden.

Yes, they had seen the lady go away. She went very early in the morning. She drove away in Sir

George Hardwood's carriage. They felt sure the carriage was Sir George Hardwood's.

"I wish she had been taken away in her coffin," Madge said to herself, and hot bitter tears welled up into her eyes and fell upon her cheeks. It seemed as though her father's sin took toll in all directions, and there was no limit to the price that had to be paid.

It was with no feeling of regret that later in the day she said good-bye to Firdale. The place had never seemed like home to her. Its grandeur jarred upon her feelings; it was a vulgar symbol of their humiliation and shame.

Not so, however, with poor Mrs. Morton. She had been so proud of her momentary greatness, of her husband's cleverness in lifting her to such a giddy height. She had aped the rich and fashionable with so much satisfaction to herself, and played the grand lady as she believed with such conspicuous success, that to leave it all behind her and be a mere nobody, to go back into obscurity again and comparative poverty, was like tearing her heart out.

She almost envied Dora. Dora was clever; she had cultivated the society of the big people—what Madge would never do; she had made friends of the rich and titled—had dropped into their ways. Now she was getting her reward.

Mrs. Morton's eyes were red with weeping when she left the house. There was no carriage waiting for her now with a pair of spanking bays—only a common growler, with their few boxes of clothes piled on the top.

"It's a terrible come-down, Madge," she said, as

she squeezed herself into the cab. "I'm sure your dear father has been cruelly wronged, or it would never have come to this."

"We will not discuss that question, mother," Madge said, quietly. "I think we ought to be only too grateful that we have a place to go to."

"Oh, I am thankful, I can't tell you how thankful. Nevertheless, I hope some day we shall be able to lift our heads again as high as anybody."

So they drove away from Firdale—the place of triumph to one, of humiliation to the other.

By the end of the week they were settled at Brynwild, where they found so much to do that they had little time to brood over the past. Madge was delighted to be back in the country again, and, though it was autumn time, with signs of decay and swiftly approaching winter on every hand, yet in her eyes it was very beautiful still.

The house—a large rambling building—stood on the slope of a low hill, and commanded a fine view of rich undulating country. The grounds, though not large, were well laid out, and beyond the ring fence were grazing farms that looked like an extensive park.

Monica came down every week-end to see how things were progressing, and to superintend matters generally. She had developed wonderfully during the last few months. All the latent energy of her nature seemed to have leaped into life. At Graystone every faculty of her nature was in danger of being atrophied from lack of use. She was like a caged bird. She never used her wings, for there was no room to fly. She never sang, for there was

no one to sing to. Her brain lay fallow, for there was nothing to think about.

Now everything was changed. She was thrown on her own resources. Her guardian no longer interfered with her, rarely came to see her. He had confidence in her judgment in the main, and quite approved of her shaping her own course in life.

On the whole Monica was very happy; her work filled her thoughts completely. Now and then she found herself dreaming over the past and wondering what had become of the companion of her girlhood.

It seemed strange that Harry should hide himself so completely, especially since his character had been cleared from every stain, and three of the most eminent judges in the land had pronounced him innocent of the crime for which he had been imprisoned.

Surely he could not know that this had happened, or he would have made himself known to his friends, and if he did not know what could such ignorance mean? There seemed three possible explanations. In the first place, he might have left the country and never saw an English paper. In the second place, he might have sunk so low in the social scale that newspapers were luxuries he never indulged in. In the third place, he might be dead, in which case it would not matter whether men praised or blamed. And Monica would dash away the wilful tears that gathered suddenly in her eyes.

In spite of time and change she loved him still. He had been her girlish ideal, her brave and faithful knight, and though she never saw his face again she knew she would cherish his memory to the last.

Rupert Grant, and the curious episode in her life

associated with his name, were gradually fading from her memory. From all she could gather he spent the largest portion of his time at Graystone, and appeared to be developing into a gloomy hypochondriac.

But Monica never thought of Rupert without feeling thankful for the timely interposition of Dorothy Fielding. Indeed, the narrowness of her escape made her shudder.

"I am sure I was not in my right mind when I promised to marry him," she would sometimes say to herself. "I was morbid and low-spirited and depressed. I imagined all kinds of stupid things, and then my heart was so heavy that I didn't care what became of me. Oh, what a deliverance it was!"

But it was on very rare occasions now that her thoughts reverted to this subject; she had too many other things to fill her mind.

So the weeks slipped away and grew into months. Brynwild had been completely metamorphosed, and was now full of thankful people who found in the change a new lease of life.

Monica carefully examined all the applications that came, and selected what she deemed the most deserving cases. Generally speaking they were industrious working men, who had met with bad accidents, and who came after weary months of suffering in city hospitals.

To such people the sight of the country was like a glimpse of heaven, and a month at Brynwild did them more good than all the physic they had so uncomplainingly taken,

CHAPTER XXXV.

LIFE'S LITTLE DAY.

LORD MENHENIOT had nearly given up all hope of finding his son, and was painfully depressed in consequence. He blamed himself now for not acknowledging him as soon as he discovered the relationship; blamed himself for not meeting him when he came out of prison; blamed himself for allowing the trial to proceed on the lines it did; blamed himself for a dozen things that he could not have helped had he tried.

He tried to atone for his past hesitancy and neglect by sparing neither time nor money in his efforts to discover Harry's whereabouts, but all his labour ended in failure.

Rupert Grant might have enlightened him very considerably on the question had he felt disposed. But though Rupert lived in daily and nightly torment on account of what he had done, he never dreamed of easing his conscience by making a full confession. And yet in reality Rupert was troubled not so much on account of what had happened to Harry as on account of the fact that Blokes was alive and might at any time make public all the facts.

The persistent reappearance of Blokes kept him in perpetual torment. Blokes tracked him with all the

certainty of a bloodhound, and was disposed under no circumstances to show the least consideration for his feelings.

Now and then he discussed with himself the probabilities of what would happen if Blokes did his worst. What could he prove? How many people had seen him inside the fence the night before the accident? In which way could he be connected with the fatality of the following day?

Looking at the matter broadly he could not see that he had anything to fear. And yet he was afraid to face the issue. Even to be remotely mixed up in such a case would be very awkward. If it once got into the law courts everything would be sifted to the bottom. Harry's relationship to the Earl would be made clear, and of course his interest in trying to get Harry out of the way. It wanted but a single word to be spoken and all the rest would follow inevitably.

He might not be convicted of murder or even of manslaughter. He might be acquitted, and yet many people would have their doubts still. There were awkward presumptions that would inevitably tell against him.

So he deemed it wiser to bear the ill of Blokes's continual reappearance than to fly to others that might prove a hundred times worse.

He rarely went across to the Hall now, though he spent considerable time at the vicarage. There was not that freedom between him and the Earl that once characterised their intercourse. In fact, he always felt uneasy in the Earl's presence. The keen grey eyes of his kinsman seemed to burn into his

very soul, and he sometimes wondered if he guessed the terrible secret that darkened all his days.

The Earl did not trouble himself that Rupert came so rarely to see him. They had never possessed much in common, and he was not at all surprised, after all that had happened, that Rupert avoided him.

"And yet I have done the best I could for him," he would reflect sometimes. "I even did my best to promote a marriage between him and Monica after I knew I had a son of my own. I was foolish, perhaps, but the young dog has never been encouraged to earn his own living."

As the winter wore slowly away the Earl got terribly depressed. Graystone Hall seemed like a prison to him. All the light and sunshine had gone out of it since Monica went away. His wife was worse than dead. Her lucid moments got fewer and fewer. The west wing of the house was wholly given up to her and her attendants.

"We are all of us fools," he would sometimes say to himself. "We try to improve on Nature's order. We follow custom rather than truth, and account social position of more value than anything else. Ah me, I was happiest when I defied society and played the fool in the eyes of the world, and followed my own heart, and married the girl I loved. I wonder if she had lived what would have happened!"

The Earl never pined so much for company as he did during those dreary winter days, never longed so ardently for some news of Harry. But every day brought the same pang of disappointment. No trace of the young man could be found. Up to a certain point his steps could be followed easily

enough, and the Earl learned with a bitter pang how bravely he had struggled and how cruel the world had been to him.

But all at once he disappeared, and no young man bearing his name could be heard of in any direction. Inquiries were set on foot in all the great centres throughout the country, in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Bristol, but all to no purpose.

Every day the Earl kept hoping that some clue would be discovered, that among the myriads of toilers who daily strive for their bread he would appear, but it was not to be.

So the days wore away until Christmas dawned, and then unexpectedly and without a struggle Lady Menheniot passed out of life. The vicar and his son heard the news with consternation. It was a new and unexpected turn in the wheel of fortune, and might mean the destruction of all their hopes and expectations. Lord Menheniot might marry again and have sons and daughters.

Rupert contemplated the possibility in sheer agony and terror of mind. After all his scheming and plotting and sinning his expectations might be cut off at the last.

On the last day of the old year he was at his wits' end and almost demented. He was badly in want of money, but how to raise another loan he did not know. While he was prospective heir of Graystone it was not difficult, but now that Lady Menheniot was dead, and there was a possibility that the Earl might marry again, the entire condition of things was changed,

Moreover, he could not himself ignore that possibility. During the forenoon he and his father had talked the matter over, and the more they discussed it the more clearly they saw that the possibility amounted almost to a probability.

"You see, Rupert," said the vicar, "that for the last dozen years he has had no real pleasure in his home, for all that time his wife has been helpless and practically imbecile."

"But she needn't have died," snarled Rupert. "Everybody thought she would live till she was ninety."

"But she has died," said the vicar; "that is the point we have to consider, and now that Monica is out of the way what's to hinder him from marrying again?"

"It'll be a beastly shame if he does," growled Rupert.

"No, no. Don't use inelegant words even though you may be cross," the vicar said, mildly. "Of course he may not marry again. He may not. Let us hope he will not."

"But there's always the possibility hanging over one's head," Rupert said, dolefully.

"I know it, my son, and it comes hard on you. For myself it does not matter. I am getting an elderly man, and my modest living is practically assured me to the end."

"I wish mine was," Rupert growled. "I'm in a chronic state of hardupness."

"Well, you must try again with the new year," his father said, encouragingly. "There must surely be an opening for you soon, I really don't think

the Home Secretary has treated you fairly. A number of crumbs have fallen from his table lately."

"There are always so many hungry mouths about," Rupert growled.

"Nevertheless, it is quite time your claims were considered," and the vicar retired to his study.

Rupert kept indoors while the daylight lasted, and brooded over the troubles and hardships of his life. He was almost afraid to venture forth in the daylight lest Blokes should be anywhere about. He had not seen that gentleman for over a fortnight, and was in mortal dread lest at any moment he should reappear upon the scene.

Blokes had become a perfect nightmare to him, and he often wondered if there was no possible way of shaking him off. He did not wish to be guilty of another crime, but he seriously thought that there might be times in one's life when a crime was justifiable.

"The leech will suck me to death," he muttered to himself, "unless I can get rid of him—and that pretty quickly."

Yet he knew very well that, strength for strength and cunning for cunning, Blokes was more than a match for him.

It was a cold, raw day, with a damp complaining wind that seemed to find its way into one's bones. Rupert sat with his feet on a corner of the fender staring out of the window. He felt that life was not worth living, and that he wouldn't be sorry when it came to an end. He had no mission, no purpose, no ambition in any true sense of that word. He had

been brought up mainly to do nothing and he had done it, and was weary of it.

At best he was but a trifle without earnestness or sincerity. He had trifled with love and with life and with fortune. He had plotted for ignoble and unworthy ends, but even his plots were clumsy and ill-considered. He had never done anything well and cleverly—not even evil. And now on the last day of another year life's outlook was darker than ever it had been before.

When it grew dark he put on his hat and overcoat and went for a long walk. The wind had got up with the setting of the sun, and was now surging through the trees with a dull, monotonous roar.

In the village street he paused for a few minutes outside the Congregational church. The schoolroom underneath was lighted up. A tea-meeting was in progress and through the open door came the sound of singing,

Be present at our table, Lord.

The familiar words touched his heart with a strange feeling of tenderness.

"Those poor folk seem happy enough," he muttered, "though heaven knows why I should call them poor. I only wish I were as rich."

A few minutes later Graystone was behind him, and with the wind at his back he tramped briskly on, resolving to make a circuit of five or six miles before he reached home for dinner.

Once or twice he paused, for in lulls of the wind he fancied he heard footsteps behind him; but on looking back he could see nothing—the lonely road seemed quite deserted.

"I do believe I'm growing nervous," he muttered to himself; "I'm everlastingly imagining things. Ah! there are those footfalls again, but they are in the field this time—some shepherd or farmer most likely. What an idiot I am."

And he stopped and lighted a cigar, then walked on a little more slowly.

Half a mile further on the road took a turn to the right, and was carried five hundred yards further on, over a deep railway cutting by a long bridge with low parapets.

At the turn of the road a man stepped suddenly out of the shadow of the hedge and confronted him. With a muttered oath Rupert tried to hurry past.

"No, guv'nor," said the man, "yer i'nt goin' to escape me thet w'y."

"But why are you everlastingly dogging my steps?" Rupert said, angrily. "The thing is becoming intolerable."

"I'm sorry yer look at it in thet light. I thought I were lettin' yer off pertickler easy."

"Easy, man; you are like a leech or a thousand leeches rolled into one."

"I've not the ackwinetince of them things," Blokes answered, insolently. "But the truth is I'm hawd up, guv'nor, and I want a small sum on accaunt."

"You are not nearly as hard up as I am."

"No! Well, thet is misfo'tunite. But in any kise I must have a draw to-night."

"But how are you to get it?"

"I will walk home with yer and pay my respec's to yer pairent or to yer relition at the 'all."

"I don't see how that will help you," Rupert said, angrily.

"But I do," was the reply. "If you've no money with yer, I've no doubt yer respected par or mar will 'elp yer out."

"Well, how much do you want?" Rupert asked, desperately.

"Well, I carnt do with less than a fiver, guv'nor."

"Do you mean five pounds?"

"Thet is what I means to a dot."

They were walking side by side across the bridge, and Rupert stopped suddenly. A feeling of utter despair gripped at his heart.

Along the line an express train was advancing at full speed.

"You must be content with less than five," Rupert said, pleadingly.

"By 'evins no; I'll see yer swing first," was the defiant answer.

"And I will swing first," Rupert answered, in a sudden blaze of passion, and he seized Blokes in a moment and flung him over the parapet in front of the advancing train.

But swift as a flash Blokes thrust his hand inside Rupert's collar, and held fast with the grip of death.

For several moments he hung suspended high above the railway track. Rupert tried to draw him back again, but he had not strength; besides, Blokes's bony knuckles were pressing into his neck and throttling him. He could hear the panting express drawing nearer and nearer. Blokes was cursing and screaming and pleading to be drawn back. He

made a desperate effort to get his breath and pull back the suspended man, but it was too late; then he tried to grip the wall as he felt himself being drawn over the parapet. His eyes were starting out of their sockets. A noise as of a thousand thunders was in his ears; then the world seemed to slip suddenly from beneath his feet, a moment of relief followed as they dropped into space, and then—then the great mystery that no man living can unravel.

The great engine caught them both as they fell with an impact that made the drivers shudder.

The brakes were immediately put on, and the express brought to a standstill at Graystone Station, where the drivers told their story.

In a few minutes a search party was got together, and not long after the two bodies were found, one on each side of the track, but neither was recognisable, except by the clothes.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

IT was a bright, warm morning in February, so bright indeed that one was almost tempted to think the winter had taken its departure once more, and that spring-time lay full upon the land.

Monica was busy with her letters, and her guardian sat in an easy-chair by the window reading *The Times*. Since the death of his wife Lord Menheniot had spent a good deal of his time in London, and every now and then he ran out to Bayswater to have a look at Monica, whom he regarded almost in the light of a daughter.

Monica had two beds vacant at Brynwild for which she had a dozen applicants from almost as many hospitals, and she was wondering now which two out of the dozen she should select, or, more correctly, which ten out of the remaining eleven she should reject, for one of the two cases she had decided on without a moment's hesitation.

It was her aim to select only the most worthy and pressing cases that were brought under her notice. Brynwild was not the only convalescent home in the land by very many; nevertheless, it offered many special advantages, and those who came she prided herself were picked cases—cases that deserved special help and treatment.

"I shall select this in any case," she said, turning toward the Earl and handing him a letter.

He dropped his paper at once and took the letter from her hand. It was a somewhat lengthy epistle, and was signed by the matron of one of the large hospitals.

It stated that the person on whose behalf application was made was a young day labourer of some twenty-five or six years of age; that six months previously he fell off a scaffold (which clearly had been tampered with by some one), and had been picked up for dead and conveyed to the mortuary; that some hours later it was discovered that he still breathed, when of course he was conveyed to the hospital; that for the space of a month he remained absolutely unconscious; that for another month he had no recollection of who he was or where he came from. But in addition to the injury to his head both his arms were broken, one of them in two places, and that three or four of his ribs were also fractured, in addition to other internal injuries.

The doctors regarded him as an interesting case, but had absolutely no hope of his recovery. Surgical skill, however, had wrought what at one time would have been called a miracle. He was now a sound man again. All that he needed was a month or two in the country with plenty of fresh air, exercise, and nourishing food.

"I shall be curious to see a young man who has gone through so much and come out alive," Monica said, as her guardian handed her back the letter.

"I should like to see him myself," the Earl

answered, languidly. "I think I will run down next week and have a look at your asylum."

"Do, Guardy. What day will you come?"

"Let me see—to-day is Tuesday, isn't it? Say this day week."

"That will do splendidly. I shall go down myself on Friday and will remain till you come."

"I confess I am curious to see the ins and outs of your work," he said, with a smile.

"Why curious?"

"Well, at one time I thought you would have been the last woman in the world to embark on any such undertaking. On the whole, however, I think you are doing the right thing."

"On the whole, however!" she laughed. "How qualified!"

"I'm afraid I'm not an enthusiast on any subject," he said, with a pathetic smile.

"I'm afraid you are not, Guardy. But then——"

"Then what, Monica?"

"Oh, well, life has brought you a lot of worry, I know, and worry cools most enthusiasms."

"It is a mistake, Monica, not to have a definite aim in life. To be born with expectations is a misfortune. It was the curse of poor Rupert's life."

"To be born with nothing seems as great a misfortune sometimes," Monica replied. "Think of Harry Morton, or whatever his real name is."

The Earl started and flushed slightly; then answered quietly enough, "Yes, but he was the victim of fraud and deceit. In any other circumstances he would have made his mark."

"It's a curious world," Monica mused. "The

honest man is sent to gaol and trampled upon when he comes out, the swindler runs riot in luxury."

"But only for a little while. Poor Morton's triumph was soon over."

"That was a mere accident. He might have gone on for years swindling people, and living in pomp and splendour, had you not succeeded in getting fresh evidence in Harry's case. If all that one hears is true, it is not one rogue in twenty who gets his deserts."

"I am inclined to think otherwise," the Earl said, thoughtfully. "There seems to me no wrong-doing that does not bring its penalty. We may not always see it. The world can only judge of what is on the surface. The bitterest punishments of life are never heard of. I fancy that Morton suffered infinitely greater torment in his prosperity than he ever did in the days of his poverty."

"He's made other people suffer torments, at any rate," Monica said, indignantly.

"Ah, my child, no man pulls his house about his ears who does not include other people in the ruin."

"Yes, that seems the unrighteous part of the whole business. What justice or equity is there in allowing the righteous to suffer for the guilty?"

"They don't suffer for them, Monica; they suffer with them because we are united in families and communities. But Nemesis does not stop till she overtakes the original offender."

"Oh, I doubt that," Monica answered, doggedly. "The only good I can see in the whole sad business is that it gives people who are well off, and who are in danger of growing selfish and mean, an oppor-

tunity of getting out of their meanness and doing a little bit of good in the world."

"I'm afraid the good we do is very small," the Earl said, reflectively, as if to himself, and then silence fell.

On the Friday morning Monica started for Bryn-wild. The new patient, whom she was so interested in, had arrived the previous afternoon, but neither Madge nor her mother had seen him.

So after Monica had rested herself a little she went off on a voyage of exploration. The day was bright, with a crisp, cool air and a refreshing warmth in the sunshine.

She found the new patient at the far end of the grounds walking alone. She came upon him suddenly in turning a corner, and both looked up with a start. The recognition was instantaneous.

"Harry!"

"Monica!"

Monica leant against a tree to keep herself from falling. A lump came into her throat which threatened to choke her. A mist came up before her eyes which blotted out everything. Then with a great surge of joy in her heart she drew herself together and smiled.

Harry was the first to speak. "I never expected to see you here," he said, slowly, and his lips trembled in spite of every effort to keep them still.

"It is the unexpected that happens, Harry," she said in her old winsome way. "But now I understand your long silence. But why did you change your name?"

"I had no right to the name of Morton," he said.

"And to tell you the truth, I was not particularly proud of it. But how does it happen that you are down here?"

"I am interested in this place," she said, with a smile, "and I visit it every now and then."

"You know the lady, perhaps, who owns it. It seems very noble to give up a beautiful place like this for the benefit of the poor and suffering."

"I know the lady a little," Monica answered, with averted eyes.

"You live in the neighbourhood, perhaps?"

"No. I live in London."

"Oh, yes, of course," he said, with averted eyes.

"I was forgetting."

"Forgetting what?"

"I sat near you one day in St. Paul's Cathedral. Was it last summer or the summer before? I have almost failed to keep account of time. Your guardian was with you, and you were talking about your new house. Is your—your—husband well?"

"I have no husband, Harry," she replied, with downcast eyes. "I could not marry Rupert Grant. It was impossible."

He drew a long breath and did not speak again for several seconds. They had reached a sunny spot against a high wall, and had seated themselves on a garden chair.

"And Rupert?" he questioned at length.

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, he died on New Year's Eve," and she told him all the story as the villagers, the engine drivers, the jury-men, and the witnesses had pieced it together.

He listened with intense interest, and when she had finished he looked her full in the face and said, "And is the name of the man known who was reported to have dogged his steps, and who fell over the bridge with him?"

"From all that can be gathered he appears to have been a notorious character known under many *aliases*, but generally by the name of Blokes. But what hold he had upon Rupert, and why they were together, no one appears to have the slightest idea."

"It's a tragic end," Harry said after a long pause, and his eyes went wandering across the green fields that lay smiling in the sunshine. He knew more than he cared just then to reveal.

"It is terribly sad," Monica replied. "Guardy thinks the vicar will never recover from the shock."

"And is the Earl well?" Harry asked, at length.

"Yes, very well. He seems better than he has been for years."

Then silence fell between them again. Both were thinking of the old days when, as youth and maiden, they roamed over the green uplands of Graystone. Every now and then Monica glanced timidly up into his face. He was paler and thinner than he used to be, but she could detect no other change. He was just as handsome and just as clear-eyed as in those old happy days before that cruel shadow fell.

How the tones of his voice thrilled her still! All the dormant passion of her soul seemed suddenly to flame into being. Neither time, nor change, nor suffering could turn her heart from him. He was the master musician that could touch all her life to

music. He might be poor and nameless, but he was a gentleman, and, in her eyes, a hero.

To him it was like a dream of heaven to be sitting again by her side. He wondered if it was because he had not fully recovered from his accident that his heart beat so tumultuously. He scarcely dared to look at her. Her beauty was even more bewitching than in the old days.

Ah! if that shadow did not lie upon his name he would dare to hope even now. But since in the eyes of the world he was a forger, and must ever remain such, he could only sigh over what might have been. It would be cowardly even to dream of such happiness.

Monica spoke again after awhile. "The world has treated you very hardly, Harry," and she lifted her eyes timidly to his.

"It gives no chance to the man who is down," he said; "I tried my best, God knows. But the fact that I had been in prison always came to the top, somehow."

"But how did people find out?"

"That's more than I can tell. I had to adopt another name at length."

"Ah well," she said, smiling brightly, "that is all over now."

"Oh, no," he said, slowly and sadly. "It can never be all over. I've brought myself to face the inevitable. Once a gaol-bird always a gaol-bird."

"But not when you have been proved to be innocent."

"Proved to be innocent?" he said questioningly. "You mean that there are a few people who still believe in me."

"Oh, no, I don't. You surely have heard? Has no one told you?"

"I do not know what you refer to," he said.

"Have you not seen it in the papers that there was a fresh inquiry?"

"What fresh inquiry? I have seen nothing."

"Oh, then, I've a wonderful piece of news for you," and she told him everything.

Harry listened like a man in a dream. It seemed altogether too good to be true.

"Are you sure you are not unintentionally deceiving me, Monica?" he cried, eagerly.

"I'm absolutely certain, Harry. Why, it has been in all the papers."

"Oh, Monica, Monica," and he rose to his feet and took her hands in his. "If—if you were only poor——" and he dropped her hands and turned away his head.

"I am poor," she said, impulsively.

He turned again and looked at her. She was most simply dressed in a costume of blue-serge.

"Have you had losses?" he questioned.

"Great losses," she answered.

"Then—then—oh, Monica, if I work hard and win may I ever dare to love you?"

"Do you love me, Harry?" she questioned, with a world of tenderness shining in her liquid eyes.

"Oh, Monica, since we were boy and girl together I have never done anything else. And yet I have done my best to forget you."

"Let us walk down here under the trees," she said. "I have so much to say to you," and they turned and walked away side by side.

"I have tried to forget you also," she said, with downcast eyes. "I gave up hope; you seemed utterly lost to me and to all else, and in my misery and despair I promised to marry Rupert. Guardy desired it, and I was so unhappy that I did not care what happened. Can you forgive me, Harry?"

"Forgive you, Monica? I have nothing to forgive."

"I ought to have been true to you. I knew you loved me, for you told me so, and I ought never to have promised what I did."

"And you have really cared for me all the time?" he questioned, a great light coming into his eyes.

"Cared for you, Harry? Oh, you must have known."

"It seems still too good to be true," he answered. "But I will work and win. I will get 'called' yet. And then—and then——"

"And I will help you all I can," she answered, a beautiful light shining in her eyes.

They were far away from the house, shut in by clustering evergreens—no one could see them—no one but their Maker.

He took her beautiful face between his thin, wasted hands, and looked tenderly into her sweet, liquid eyes.

"I am glad you are poor, Monica," he said; and then he stooped and kissed her.

"I am rich now," she answered, meeting his gaze fearlessly.

And for answer he kissed her again and again.

"Now, Harry," she said, "we will go back to the house, for there are other surprises in store for you."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FATHER AND SON.

A QUARTER of an hour later Harry was alone in the little sitting-room set apart for Madge and her mother, much wondering what other surprise could be in store for him. Monica had gone off in search of the usual occupants of this pleasant room.

She found Madge in the kitchen interviewing the cook. Mrs. Morton was in her bedroom.

"There's a stranger in your room who wants to see you particularly," Monica said. "Can you spare a few minutes?"

"Oh, yes, I am quite at liberty now," Madge said, brightly.

"And are you still happy in your work?" Monica questioned, as they walked away together.

"Very happy, indeed. I bless you every day of my life for finding me such a home."

"Hush, don't say that. But the stranger who is waiting to see you, you may find very inquisitive, so I have only one request to make, and that is that you do not let him know what connection I have with this place."

"Oh, that will not be at all difficult," Madge said, with a smile. "But is it some one I know well?"

"Yes, I think so. But you will soon be able to answer that question for yourself," and Monica

pushed open the sitting-room door, and allowed Madge to pass in front of her.

Harry rose from his chair directly the door opened. There was a sudden cry of joy from Madge, and the next moment she was locked in his arms.

"Now, I think, I will leave you two together for awhile," Monica said, with a smile. "I am sure you will have a lot to say to each other; meanwhile, I will go in search of your mother."

Poor Mrs. Morton, when she came into Harry's presence, laughed and cried, and protested her husband's innocence, and became quite hysterical.

Harry did not attempt to undeceive her respecting the innocence of her husband. If she found any little comfort in the delusion, as far as he was concerned, she was quite welcome to it.

But the greatest surprise of all was in store for Harry on the following Tuesday, when Lord Menheniot visited Brynwild, and not for Harry only, but for Monica and Madge and Mrs. Morton.

Lord Menheniot had kept his secret well. Only to Rupert Grant had he confided the fact that the son he was in search of was Harry Morton, and Rupert had allowed the secret to die with him.

Monica had lost all interest in the Earl's search. If she thought about the matter at all it was only to hope that he might be unsuccessful, for she had fully convinced herself that this son, if he were alive, was a clown, and a clown of the worst order.

She went to the station on Tuesday morning to meet the train the Earl travelled by, and the weather being fine, they walked up to the house.

"And how is your asylum getting on?" the Earl asked, when they had got some little distance from the station.

"Very well indeed, Guardy. But I have an interesting bit of news for you."

"Indeed!"

"You remember that case that I felt so interested in last week?"

"The young man who fell off the scaffold?"

"The same. Well, he turns out to be—whom do you think?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Harry Morton."

"No!" and the Earl stopped suddenly short in his walk.

"It's as true as you and I are here. I was never so surprised in my life."

"And he is at Brynwild now?"

"Of course he is. Where else should he be? I can tell you we've had a real reunion. Oh, it's been like old times."

"And has he properly recovered?"

"He's just splendid. He looks pale and thin, but he declares he never felt better in his life."

"He knows, of course, that his good name has been restored?"

"He does now. I told him last Friday. Oh, it was a day of surprises. And what do you think?"

"Oh, I think ever so many things," the Earl answered, gravely.

"But you'll never think this. He does not know that I have any connection with Brynwild. Indeed,

he thinks I've lost my money and am comparatively poor."

"If you've not lost it you are spending it pretty freely," the Earl answered.

"That is what it was intended for," Monica said, with a laugh. "But Harry is going to work hard to win me a position."

"To win you a position?"

"I dare say you will be very angry. But I can't help it. I've never cared for any one else."

"You mean to say that he has been making love to you?"

"I really don't know which started it, Guardy, but that's how matters stand just at present."

The Earl looked terribly grave for a moment, then a smile broke over his face, then he stood stock still and laughed.

"I'm glad you are not terribly angry," Monica said, with a little sigh of relief.

"Angry, my child. Ah, me, how blind I've been. But I'll tell you a secret now. Harry is my son."

"Your son?" she said, stopping and seizing his hands. "Your son? The one you've been searching for so long?"

"The very same, Monica."

They had entered the grounds now, and for some distance they walked on in silence. Indeed, Monica's feelings were in such a state of tumult that talking was out of the question.

At length she looked up and saw Harry advancing to meet them.

"Here comes your long-lost son," she said, and her voice broke a little. "I will leave you together ;

when you want me I shall be in the drawing-room, the only room at Brynwild that is my own."

A moment or two later the two men came face to face, and Monica turned and walked away.

The Earl seemed too overcome to speak, and Harry broke the silence.

"I have to thank you, my lord, for interesting yourself in my case," he began. But the Earl quickly cut him short.

"Hush, Harry," he said; "I want to tell you that you are my son."

Had an earthquake opened at Harry's feet he could not have been more astonished.

Half an hour later Harry came alone into the drawing-room in search of Monica.

She rose to receive him with mock seriousness and gravity. "So I understand you have made love to me under false pretences," she said; "pretending you were a poor man, I find you are an earl's son. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, fair madam," he said, in the same tone of banter. "Absolutely nothing, save that you are guilty of the same misdemeanour. I made love to you believing you to be poor, and lo! I discover you are very rich. What extenuating circumstances can you plead?"

"Ah, Harry," and she came and placed her hands upon his shoulders and looked lovingly up into his eyes, "it is your love that has made me rich. I was poor enough till Friday, and had suffered the loss of nearly everything worth possessing. To-day I am richer than the Queen."

"My darling," and his arm stole gently round her

waist, and for several moments of perfect bliss her fair head rested lovingly upon his shoulder.

"Harry," she said at length, looking at him, "you are an earl's son. I'm almost sorry. But you'll not let that fact spoil you, will you?"

"I hope not, darling."

"My father was rich," she went on, "but I'm a daughter of the people. I love them best. I get nearer their heart. I want to serve them. Most of the great and titled people I have seen oppress me."

"Sweetheart," he said, "if I can only help you in your work, as I know you will help me in mine——"

"We will always help each other," she interrupted, "and when you are a barrister you shall plead for the poor and oppressed, for the widow and orphan and those who have none to help."

And he kissed her and murmured, "I will."

* * * * *

That was many years ago now. But he has kept his promise to the very letter.

After spending a fortnight at Brynwild he went back to Graystone, dear old Graystone, and took up his studies again where he had left them off. Ernest Everett, who was M.A. of London University, became his coach for a year, and during that time he resumed his interrupted dinners at the Inner Temple, and in due course was called to the Bar.

A week later there was a double wedding in Graystone, and opinion was divided as to which attracted the greater amount of interest.

Harry and Monica were married at the parish church, and Ernest Everett and Madge in the Congregational chapel.

Madge got her heart's desire at last, and went to live again in the old home that always seemed dearer to her than any other place on earth.

Mrs. Morton remained at Brynwild. She said she would remain there till her husband's return, when she would again have a house of her own. She waited till the hand of mortality closed her eyes in the last long sleep, and no one ever told her that her husband died in abject want in a remote settlement in Brazil. He wrote out a full confession before he died, which was afterwards sent to the authorities in England, and some of it was published in the daily press. The completion of Bob's education was taken in hand by Harry, and he is now doing well in literature. But poor Dora has completely passed out of sight.

If Madge and Bob know anything they keep their own counsel. Her name is never mentioned by them in public, yet they do not forget her, and sometimes when Madge feels that her happiness is more and greater than she deserves, she looks up into her husband's face and sighs, "Poor Dora! She is part of the price paid for father's sin."

THE END.

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